



Inconclusive Modernity and the Athenian *Polykatoikia*

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A review of Ioanna Theocharopoulou's *Builders, Housewives, and the Construction of Modern Athens*, third edition with a foreword by Kenneth Frampton, Athens: Onassis Foundation, 2022, 208 pp. ISBN: 978-618-85928-3-4.

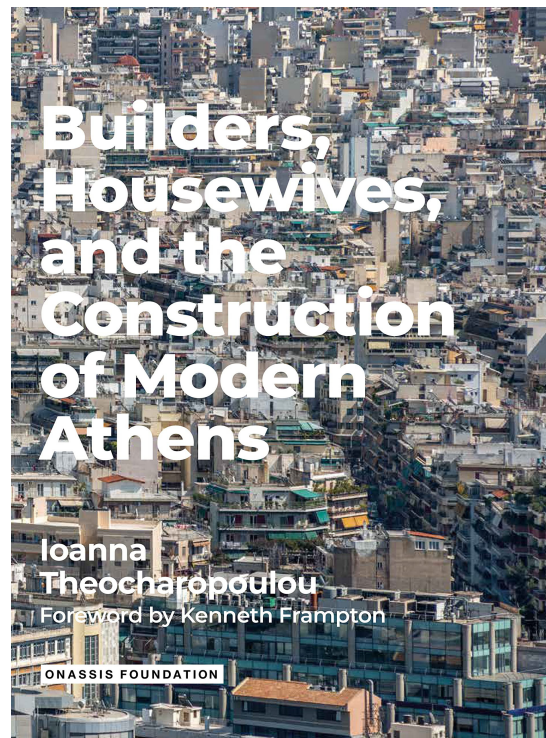
Theocharopoulou's *Builders, Housewives, and the Construction of Modern Athens* offers an eclectic social history of the Athenian multi-storey apartment building, aka the *polykatoikia*, a popular housing type that has become a trademark of the Greek city at large. Her study critically revisits Greece's urban past by enlisting a wide range of interpretative perspectives sourced from various academic fields, seeking to provide a more nuanced account of how its capital city grew exponentially from the *répétition différente* of the *polykatoikia*.

Keywords: Athens; *polykatoikia*; *antiparochi*; apartment building; modernity; vernacular



Ioanna Theocharopoulou's *Builders, Housewives, and the Construction of Modern Athens*, in its third and updated edition of 2022, presents the urban development of Athens 'as a patchwork of improvisations and adaptations —*ad hoc*' (9), offering an eclectic social history of the Athenian multi-storey apartment building, the *polykatoikia*, that has become a trademark, so to speak, of the Greek city at large. The study critically revisits Greece's recent past, beginning with its establishment as an independent state in 1830, aiming to provide a more nuanced account of how its capital city grew exponentially from the *répétition différente* of the *polykatoikia* from the interwar period onwards. Theocharopoulou portrays Athens as a popular, democratic, effective, and humane expression of a genuinely modernist urban vision through an academic yet vivid writing style, enlisting a wide range of interpretative perspectives or 'explanatory-critical "sites"' (9) sourced from various academic fields and providing a comprehensive bibliographical survey of the subject that includes archival material, sources on popular culture and limited interviews. Set within a broadly anthropological/ethnographic tradition, her research embarks on a cultural exploration of modern Greekness that contextualises the evolution of urban domesticity from the late-19th and early-20th century neo-classical house — Greece's formal architecture of classical revival adapted for both bourgeois and popular housing — to the pre- and post-WWII modern apartment.

Theocharopoulou's study, first published in 2017, mediates between two scholarly views.¹ The first is an "inward looking out" one that targets global audiences and reveals a rekindled domestic interest in the legacy of the Athenian *polykatoikia*, paving the way for the critical reappraisal of its spatial, social, and cultural imprint.² The second is an "outward looking in" perspective that has drawn scholarly attention from abroad to the cityscape of Athens, the scenery against which Greece's economic and social turmoil from 2009 to 2018 unfolded, exemplified in the works of Richard Woditsch and Kilian Schmitz-Hübsch, who have generated perceptive morphological and typological analyses of the Athenian apartment building.³ Theocharopoulou's



work, along with other studies that offer cultural insights,⁴ has most certainly contributed to the expansion of the debate beyond national borders, while Tassos Langis and Yiannis Gaitanidis's 2021 documentary based on her book has further popularised her findings.⁵



Figure 1: Urban canyon in the Gyzi neighbourhood, Lomvardou Street, Athens. © Stavros Alifragkis, 2010.

The *polykatoikia*, propelled by an idiosyncratic system of urban development known as *antiparochí* through which land-use rights were transferred to small-scale developers and construction professionals in exchange for apartments and/or shops in the building erected on the same land (9), is the result of a resilient and essentially monopolistic model of housing. In the face of the underperformance of central social policies and state-run housing programmes, this kind of apartment building served as a response to rural-to-urban migration, effectively facilitating Greece's post-WWII recovery. Ever since the early 1950s, when the first *polykatoikias* of *antiparochí* began to etch their indelible mark on the Athenian landscape, this housing type has been bitterly contested by proponents of opposing ideologies. On the one hand, a Marxist-inflected rhetoric called for the state to assume a large role in the housing sector as part of a visionary yet unattainable world, while on the other, a liberal mindset embraced the cost-benefit perspective of speculative ventures by private entrepreneurs as a response to the challenges of the urban housing shortage that was pragmatic yet myopic.

The *polykatoikia* spearheaded Greece's postwar reconstruction, revitalising its frail private economy and offering a concrete and tangible anchoring point and pivoting lever for the country's family-based society in a precarious world. It stimulated the recently urbanised workforce to partake in a shared dream of prosperity through ownership by enabling the distribution of wealth, promoting cross-class social interaction, and, eventually, expediting Greece's modernisation. At the same time, it served as the scapegoat for all the deficiencies of Athens (high coverage and building ratios, irregular street patterns, narrow streets, small plots, lack of public/green space and parking spaces, etc.), most notably for eroding its neoclassical architectural identity, a cultural reborrowing initiated during the Bavarian rule in Greece (1833–1862).

Theocharopoulou bypasses the debate by emphasising the significant contribution of the construction sector to the so-called Greek economic miracle, class mobility, and social cohesion in the decades that followed WWII, at a juncture when both Marxists and liberals agreed that the only way forward for Greece's economy was a rapid, always-postponed industrialisation (124). Moreover, she argues persuasively that the *polykatoikia* owes its typological and morphological features to a bottom-up approach that corresponded to the actual needs and expectations of the common people rather than to central planning or design professionals.

Theocharopoulou narrows her focus to just two of the many actors active in *antiparochí*, the builder-cum-developer and the housewife-cum-interior designer, chiefly internal migrants that sought a better life in the city in the aftermath of WWII and the ensuing civil war (1946–1949), casting them as the unsung heroes of an

episode of modernity that was shaped by the non-experts. Although there is much to be said for the counter-argument, that is, the unspoken and uncharted involvement of numerous formally trained professionals in *antiparochí*, Theocharopoulou's line of inquiry is noteworthy, at the very least because it ties architectural form to societal development.⁶



Figure 2: Typical five-storey apartment buildings in the Neapoli neighbourhood, Asklipiou and Velissariou streets, Athens. © Stavros Alifragkis, 2016.

The political and economic circumstances of the times, that is, the inept retroaction of successive right-wing governments and the chimerical left-wing opposition to the challenges of urban planning, the heavy-handed presence of the US in the domestic affairs of Greece, a growing entrepreneurial mindset, and the country's awkward transition to Western consumerism, forms a nebulous *mélange* of competing dynamics that serves as the backdrop of Theocharopoulou's story. Multiple, interconnected yet relatively self-sufficient subplots — 19th century Athenian domesticity (28–36), popular culture (e.g., Karagiozis, 49–51, 136–139), language (51–55), the Asia Minor catastrophe (63–68), interwar architectural modernism (68–69), Doxiadis's town planning (85–89, 95–102), ethnography and folklore (91–95, 148–151), the

reconstruction efforts (102–107), the discourse of technical specialists (161–164), and so forth — are key interlocutors in a slightly complicated though attractive argument that ultimately centres on the unacknowledged yet decisive role of builders (75–81, 123–131) and housewives (147–148, 152–161, 164–169).

Primarily addressing an international audience that is less acquainted with the particularities of the Athenian paradigm, Theocharopoulou uses these subplots to introduce an impressive array of premises, each one, individually, venturing little beyond the findings of existing literature. Perhaps the most telling example is how Theocharopoulou pieces Constantinos Doxiadis's doctoral research on the positioning of ancient Greek temples,⁷ his views on popular housing, and his understudied contribution to Greece's post-WWII recovery together into a loosely fitted puzzle, without, however, commenting on his *antiparochí* projects, even though an examination of them would have been a valuable addition to the discussion.⁸ The undisputed originality of Theocharopoulou's approach lies in how these premises function collectively as a finely tuned montage that triggers imaginative counterpoints to the main theme throughout the book rather than in the heuristic value of each individual leitmotiv.

The various subplots of the book offer compact overviews of complex, correlated urban phenomena that, on occasion, could have been more extensively mapped. The book shifts in focus, for example, from an exploration of the predominantly formal construction in the city centre — the typical *polykatoikia* of *antiparochi* — to an account of informal or quasi-informal construction on legally owned land, vertical, small-scale additions to existing houses with or without planning permits, and squatter settlements in the suburbs or peri-urban areas of Athens (134–135, 140–142). This shift has the effect of overstating the role of 'unschooled' yet skilled builders from rural Greece (130) in shaping the image of modern Athens and the degree of informality of their activities.

This perspective may facilitate interesting yet bold comparisons to other "impromptu" residential construction types from around the world (182–183), but it downplays the documented explicit or implicit contribution of engineers in the design and permit-issuing processes. It also neglects to acknowledge the fact that many builders-cum-developers functioned within the bounds of the law, that is, obtained architectural plans designed and/or signed by engineers for the building permit process, which, in turn, encouraged a unique cross-fertilisation between formal and informal construction practices.

Adding to the perplexity, though not pertinent to the main argument, is the use of Thessaloniki as an example of 19th-century neoclassical domesticity (29–32), given that the city is primarily recognised for its Central European architectural eclecticism.

The excess of interconnected micro-narratives could be said to distract from one of the main contributions of Theocharopoulou's work; the notion that the *polykatoikìa* constitutes a fascinating paradox that evolved within the modernist tradition but also resonated with the local, informal idiom. These white, cubic, five- to eight-storey buildings with their syncopated *portes-fenêtres*, their façade-long balconies, and their top-floor setbacks are simplified interpretations of modernity (121). At the same time, they reflect the local construction ethos of an aspiring middle class, whose pragmatic yet improvised approach to urban growth is indicative of the people's 'cunning intelligence' (131–135).



Figure 3: Street façade on September 3rd Street, downtown Athens. © Stavros Alifragkis, 2012.

Significantly, Theocharopoulou discusses the locally inflected version of modernism, epitomised by the Athenian *polykatoikìa*, as a case of vernacular architecture concretised predominantly through informal construction practices from the 1950s and the 1960s; apartment buildings 'built for the people, of the people, by the people,' as Kenneth Frampton notes in his foreword (7, 136–139). Theocharopoulou's consideration of this type of popular housing, whose construction was driven largely by practical professionals, facilitates a welcome reformulation on her part of the term 'vernacular', which emphasises aspects of

urban informality and reflects the spontaneous, bottom-up processes of Greece's social reformation. One might suggest that these processes generated a novel urban experience that neutralised binary oppositions such as modern vs. traditional, planned vs. informal, urban vs. rural, rendering the *polykatoikia* a site of an uneasy compromise among pinwheeling forces that persist to this day. The resulting epistemological ambivalence — oscillating between praise and critique — reflected in relevant scholarship is further legitimised by Theocharopoulou's work.

Theocharopoulou describes the Athenian *polykatoikia* as an economically viable system for developing a dense, mid-rise, and mix-use city that substituted for central planning while often bypassing regulatory structures, a system she argues was underpinned by a particular type of Greek inventiveness (*mētis*) whose origins are Hesiod's *Mētis* in *Theogony*, a nymph that can change her shape at will. *Mētis*, according to the author, motivates the various entrepreneurs active in *antiparochí* to manoeuvre effectively both within and outside the 'system' (131–135). In the common builders who gradually ascended the social hierarchy by becoming sub-contractors, contractors, and eventually developers, she identifies a genuine success story of the 1960s, one that illustrates the impact of residential construction on the formation of the Greek middle class and its identity.

Theocharopoulou represents the other protagonist in her narrative, housewives, as an exemplary case of the silent empowerment of rural Greek women. They secured this power through their gradual introduction to urbanity and the rise of consumerism, thus corroborating the notion that actors from different social backgrounds produce varying manifestations of modernity. However, the 'voices' of builders and housewives in Theocharopoulou's account are mediated by references to magazines, newspapers, and popular culture, which lack the immediacy that other methodological approaches, such as the toolset of social anthropology, offer.⁹ For example, Theocharopoulou utilises popular cinema to illustrate the novel subjectivities of the times, despite the fact that movies often caricatured aspects of Greek society (e.g., female 'cheeky subordination' [166]).

Ultimately, Theocharopoulou manages to decipher the conundrum of the Greek city and, at the same time, differentiate her interpretation from others by undertaking a close and revealing study of two often-overlooked groups. Her protagonists, which she treats at times with affection and admiration and at others with scholarly distance, are the driving force behind a compelling narration of Greece's modern cultural history that, apart from educating international audiences, provides valuable markers for the nation's self-reflection.

Notes

- ¹ The book is the culmination of a decade-long engagement with the subject that began as a PhD dissertation (Columbia University, 2007) titled 'Urbanization and the Emergence of the *Polykatoikia*: Habitat and Identity, Athens 1830–1974'.
- ² Simeoforidis and Aesopos 2001; Koubis, Moutsopoulos, and Scoffier 2002; Antonas, Xagoraris, Hari, and Oraopoulos 2004; Dragonas and Skiada 2012.
- ³ Woditsch 2014; Woditsch 2018; Schmitz-Hübsch 2023. Since praise for modern Athens, that is, the city that lies beyond the tourist beaten path, is sporadic and at odds with local sentiment, when such praise is offered, it needs to be acknowledged, especially when the source is Kenneth Frampton, the distinguished scholar of modern architecture and author of the foreword to Theocharopoulou's book. Athens's compact yet flexible urbanity first captured his imagination as early as 1959. However, his positive disposition toward the city assumed a more concrete form in 1987, in the foreword of the translation in Greek of his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. According to Theocharopoulou, he, along with American anthropologist Peter S. Allen, is one of the first foreign researchers to take a positive view of the nucleus of Athenian domesticity, the *polykatoikia* (17).
- ⁴ Aesopos 2004; Moatsou 2012; Moatsou 2014; Kalfa 2022.
- ⁵ Theocharopoulou 2004; Theocharopoulou 2005; Theocharopoulou 2013a; Theocharopoulou 2013b; Theocharopoulou 2015.
- ⁶ Kalfa, Alifragkis, and Tournikiotis 2022; Alifragkis and Kalfa 2021. Alifragkis and Kalfa 2021 is a short documentary based on "Antiparochi and (Its) Architects" (2018–2022), a research project conducted at the School of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens by Konstantina Kalfa, Panayotis Tournikiotis, Stavros Alifragkis, Emilia Athanassiou, Christos Kritikos, and Xenia Sotiropoulou.
- ⁷ See also Tsiambaos 2017.
- ⁸ Kalfa and Theodosis 2022; Philippidis 2015: 193; Doxiadis 1963: 150.
- ⁹ Lampropoulou 2009.

Authors' Note

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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