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Autor: Livers Gutberlet, Hannes

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«What remains is a resilient urban morphology that continues to preserve its city life at a well-tempered human scale.»

BAVAROKRATIA?
OR
THE ALIENS THAT SHAPED
MODERN ATHENS
Hannes Livers Gutberlet

Hannes Livers Gutberlet, born 1980, runs, together with Katerina Kourkoula, the architectural practice en-route-architecture-, based in Athens, Greece. He studied economics at EBS University and architecture at TU Delft, M.I.T. and ETH Zurich. He currently is a doctoral candidate at ETH Zurich.

During the recent pandemic outbreak and the subsequent lockdown, for a certain period of time the streets of central Athens were uncannily empty. The people that created its urban and cultural liveliness were — although reluctantly — in voluntary quarantine. During those days, the sight of deserted streets appeared to be the obvious (anti-)spectacle. Equally revealing, though, was a sharpened awareness of the city's morphology in an unusual bare space condition. For an instant, one was able to perceive the strength of its urban fabric more distinctly, a texture that consists of specific densities and distances which are unique in the European context (fig. a). These and other ingredients seemed to produce a somewhat ideal canvas on which the city life of Athens usually unfolded.

The origins of Athens' urban fabric can be traced back to the moment of its declaration as the first Modern Greek capital and after the nation's liberation during the 1820s. Its national independence, however, is misleading, as it merely refers to the few years of independent Greek governance between 1827 and 1832. It thus represents a rather brief transition from almost 400 years of Ottoman occupation to the following reign by a Bavarian monarchy. The common historical narrative generalizes that the newly appointed monarch, King Otto I, and his entourage of neo-classicist architects⁽¹⁾ imposed foreign planning ideals onto the existing city and population. Armed with Germanic ambition and philhellenic romanticism, their aim was supposedly to create a new representative city capital that mirrored both neo-classicist planning principles and an idealized fantasy of Athens in classical antiquity.⁽²⁾

A more nuanced understanding, however, reveals that there were various authors, continuous local and foreign pressures as well as ad-hoc amendments that ultimately shaped its urban development. The result being a sort of *cadavre exquis* of urban plans, exposed to various course-altering forces at different times. In fact, after its liberation, Greece in general and Athens in particular, soon found itself in a hostage-like situation, within a geopolitical power play between the Great Powers: France, Great Britain and Russia. In the background, despite the growing philhellenic sentiment in Europe, the financing of its ostensible independence and reconstruction had never been considered as gratuitous by its predominantly Swiss and British lenders. The young Greek nation was thus continuously also caught up in the dilemma of having to amortize expensive loans while striving for independent sovereignty.⁽³⁾ The members of the Bavarian monarchy thereby seemed to have merely played idealistic middlemen, on a mission to reconstruct their own imagined version of what the reinvigorated ancient state ought to look like. Nevertheless, to the local and multi-ethnic Greek population, the German speaking delegation of planners and bureaucrats must have felt like amusingly arduous Aliens, landing in their unplanned albeit historically laden backyard.

The relevant events for Athens' eventual urban development began earlier and in other locations. After years of fierce battles between Greek revolutionaries and the Ottoman Empire, in 1827 the struggle for independence turned in favor of the Greeks. The Greek statesman Ioannis Kapodistrias was elected first head of state. A talented diplomat, he had previously served as an unofficial Russian ambassa-

dor to Switzerland. There, he had been involved in various diplomatic achievements for the new Swiss Federation and the promotion of philhellenism.⁽⁴⁾ Upon his return to Greece he put his stringent work ethics to the cause of constructing a new, independent and almost utopian Greek state. Years of destruction caused by a continuing war of independence had left the mainly agrarian Greek population in wretched living conditions. The consequence being poor housing, low levels of education and little land to cultivate. In order to realize his vision, Kapodistrias established various re-construction initiatives.⁽⁵⁾ Without any considerable funds available, however, the re-building of the young nation had to be funded by supporters abroad. As part of his diplomatic network and with the promotion of philhellenic societies, Kapodistrias was able to gain loans from various statesmen and bankers.⁽⁶⁾ In contrast, these affluent supporters seemed to rather have sought an opportunity for high returns with reduced risks. The Great Powers financially guaranteed all loan payments in case of default. By exploiting the growing sense of philhellenism across Europe, the lenders succeeded in strengthening their businesses without having to play the public role of the collector.⁽⁷⁾ This interplay of the philhellenic cause with background agendas marked the moment, when the idealized rebuilding of the historical cradle of western democracy became a proxy for the power play between local and international interests.⁽⁸⁾

In parallel, in his philhellenic campaign, Kapodistrias had also appealed to architects and engineers. Due to its strategic naval location, Nafplio was first declared as the nation's capital. Kapodistrias thus focused on extending other traditional port cities, in order to strengthen commerce through shipping. In Patras, he commissioned French-Greek military engineer Stamatis Voulgaris, who proposed the first modern gridded city plan in Greece.⁽⁹⁾ The urban scheme appears to have referenced Hippodamian's orthogonal plan for Piraeus from 470 B.C., but also settlements in the former British colonies of Northern America.⁽¹⁰⁾ More importantly, it created comparable properties for the sake of accumulating wealth through real-estate exchange. This ample, highly ordered and yet undeveloped land was thus set out to meet the future demand of an expected urban bourgeoisie. The geometric plan for Patras, however, was soon confronted with local realities, as existing property owners refused to succumb to an enforced redistribution of land and the collectivization of certain areas into public spaces.

Meanwhile, two other protagonists — Eduard Schaubert and Stamatis Kleanthes — were entering the Greek scene of nation building. En route from their Grand Tour through Italy, they had recently completed their studies at the Bauakademie under Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Albeit from different cultural backgrounds, they were both on a quest to explore the archeological sites of antiquity. After brief engagements on Aegina, in 1831, they decided to embark on a self-initiated (and self-funded) journey to Athens. There, they undertook an in-depth survey of the existing city, which enabled them to produce the first detailed topographic map of Athens (fig. b). Their survey had revealed that of the city's remaining 6,000 inhabitants most lived in shacks. Only 25 houses and a few churches and mosques had survived the war of independence. Schaubert gives two reasons for their idealistic undertaking. On the one hand,



(fig. a) Empty streets of contemporary Athens, 2020
Photography: Hannes Gutberlet



(fig. b) The topographic survey of Old Athens by S. Kleanthes and E. Schaubert (1831—1832). Source: Alexander Papageorgiou-Venetas, 2001



(fig. c) The urban blocks of contemporary Athens superimposed on S. Kleanthes and E. Schaubert's plan proposal for New Athens, 1833⁽¹⁶⁾

they simply considered that «the educated world of Europe» would be interested in such works. On the other, they had hoped that the Greek government would soon regard their efforts as useful in the eventual reconstruction of Athens. As the city was still under Ottoman control, they could not predict whether Kapodistrias would ever consider Athens as the new capital. They nevertheless attached great importance to surveying a much wider area far beyond the city's perimeter. They also drew on a much larger scale than previous maps had covered.⁽¹¹⁾

At the end of 1831, the young Greek nation suddenly fell into a moment of political chaos, after members of an influential Greek landowner family had assassinated Kapodistrias. Kleanthes and Schaubert seized the moment and presented their study to the new interim government. Based on their extensive knowledge of the area, they were officially appointed to develop a plan for New Athens.^(fig. c) While drafting, they remained unaware of the city's future, nor could they estimate what means would ever be available for its construction. This ambiguity drove them to finally «follow the apparent expectation of Greeks» in considering Athens as the future capital. Thus, a new and expandable city of around 40,000 inhabitants was projected. In their approach, the existing topography, exposure to natural ventilation as well as access to existing water sources was pivotal in choosing the location for the new settlements. Their final decision — to locate the new city on the northern side of the Acropolis — therefore represents a carefully crafted proposal. A plan that was simultaneously contextual, expandable for future growth as well as accounting for the ruins of antiquity. Similar to Patras, in the Athens plan, all new urban settlements revolved crescent-like around an existing and higher point of the city: the Acropolis, thereby taking advantage of the more leveled surrounding territories.

At an urban scale, Kleanthes and Schaubert's elaborate plan is based on further references and contextual considerations. The use of points de vues emphasized by theatrical boulevards radiating from the ruler's palace, mirror almost identically in scale and orientation the main axes of the baroque plan for Karlsruhe from 1715. There, the axes seemed to have been planned for the sake of geometrical symbolism. In Athens, the central location of the ruler's palace — today's Omonoia square — was geometrically constructed from an extension of existing viewpoints towards landmarks of classical antiquity: the Panathenean Stadium, the Port of Piraeus and the Acropolis Hill. As an urban pattern, Kleanthes and Schaubert proposed a generic and yet inventive superimposition of grid-structures, rotated in different directions along the two most prominent axes in order to create recurring views towards the acropolis.⁽¹²⁾

On a more detailed urban block level, the authors intended to relate to the more rural settlement structure of the existing city, characterized by patches of freestanding houses with perimeter walls, placed on larger cultivatable properties. Similarly — albeit much more orderly — their written guidelines attached to the drafted plan proposed on average 10 people per house on properties of about 1100 square meters. Each urban block then formed a compositional element of the entire urban plan, consisting of around 10—15 of such building properties. In their dimension these urban blocks appear to relate to a scale the authors must

have known well: the rectangular blocks of the Friedrichstadt in Berlin. However, in order to relate more to local climatic conditions, the proposed street widths were kept at a smaller range between 12 to 20 meters and designed with colonnades to provide protection from the sun.⁽¹³⁾

Orthogonal city plans developed in the Western world had their historical origin in the gridded cities of ancient Greece. When Schaubert later also developed plans for the Port of Piraeus, he followed a similar orientation and structure as the ancient port city designed by Hippodamus. Ironically, while Schaubert's plan for Piraeus resembles his own design for Athens, in both plans he was most likely referring to layouts of the enlightenment, the neoclassical period and — as in Patras — plans that were already being implemented in Greece at that time. The origins of his plans were thus rooted in the ancient settlements on top of which they were being planned. The fact that the planner of New Athens and other important Greek cities was eventually considered part of the oppressive Bavarian monarchy must have corroborated the sense of alienation caused by the supposedly foreign planning principles. In this sense, while Schaubert was trying to be visionary and contextual, the local population perceived his plans as anything but that.

Nevertheless, in the following year the plan for New Athens was approved as King Otto I took power in 1832. In an attempt to stabilize Greece as a new nation and to balance their power in the region, France, Great Britain and Russia had declared it a monarchy without consultation of the Greeks. Upon recommendation of the philhellenic Swiss banker Jean-Gabriel Eynard, the Great Powers appointed the Bavarian Prince the first King of Greece. Still a minor, King Otto I arrived in Greece with a delegation of legislators, physicians, architects, priests, cooks, bakers, accountants and his personal brew master. Three of these delegates formed an interim regency-council that ruled the country until Otto reached his majority. Their public role as tax collectors for the royal court's expenses became emblematic for the infamous period of the so-called Bavarokratia. Their ruthless rigor mixed with philhellenic idealism, however, must have disguised the fact that they were continuously under pressure as middlemen between Greece, the Great Powers and international lenders.

Again, similar to Patras, the plan of Kleanthes and Schaubert was soon questioned by local landowners. Illegal building, land speculation as well as resistance from the local population against rigid planning, brought any further construction to a one-year halt. Simultaneously, the lack of funds to nationalize and develop land — while under pressure to amortize existing foreign debt — exacerbated the increasingly hostile relationship between the tax-raising Bavarians and the locals. With growing impatience concerning the capital's progress, in 1834, Otto's father — King Ludwig I of Bavaria — sent his court architect Leo von Klenze to reassess the original plan during a three-month visit to Athens. As the main axes of Kleanthes and Schaubert's plan were already under construction, von Klenze must have been aware of his limited chance for a complete revision. While reducing the overall projected perimeter and the amount of public squares, his most considerable influence was in altering the eventual growth pattern of the city. On the one hand, he reduced block dimensions by splitting them into

smaller fragments, while keeping similar street widths as defined originally. On the other hand, for each building block, instead of freestanding houses, he commissioned a closed perimeter building structure. Although von Klenze also proposed to move the king's palace to the western area of the overall plan, its final location was chosen on today's eastern Syntagma Square. As a result, Kleanthes and Schaubert's initial plan — with theatrical views and public buildings orchestrated in a symbolic hierarchy — had turned into a patchwork of incoherent amendments. This loss of coherence ultimately led the two authors to resign from their official positions as city planners. Other proposals for Athens — such as Schinkel's grand vision for the extension of the Acropolis — never bore fruit. They merely represented idealized fantasies of philhellenic neo-classicists. These often self-declared Hellenists preferred to admire Greece's historical greatness from a distance, in so-called «Griechenland-Abstinenz». ⁽¹⁴⁾ Greece as an abstract idea seemed to appeal more to them, instead of being exposed — on site — to its historical complexity and the local challenges of its natural and socio-political landscape. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Despite all amendments and criticism, the layout of Kleanthes and Schaubert's plan represented a contextually referenced structure, with valuable land divisions on unbuilt territories. It provided the city with an unprecedented level of infrastructure, public institutions and exchangeable properties. The plan's embedded urban protocol of street widths and block dimensions ultimately influenced the scale of growth of typical Athenian blocks beyond the neo-classicist perimeter. These essential factors were critical to foster any kind of growth in Athens and as a model for Greece in general. Today, one could argue that it is precisely the scale and interrelationship of the city's density and block structure that has enabled Athens to develop a very distinct urban quality. It is a spatial quality created by both, a contextualized vision and piecemeal adaptations. The plan's former alienating characteristics have been absorbed entirely by the city's buildings. What remains is a resilient urban morphology that continues to preserve its city life at a well-tempered human scale.