OLD ATHENIAN HOUSES

‘HOUSE AS A MACHINE FOR COMMUNAL LIFE’

POINT SUPREME EPFL

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Introduction

In the 50's, after the war and having no commissioned work, ‘real modern architect’ Aris Konstantinidis studied extensively the anonymous architecture of Greece and published books in which he examined particular typologies, drawing lessons from the past and believing that anonymous architecture constituted the foundations on which a new architecture would be grounded, essentially interconnecting modernism with tradition.

One of his books was Old Athenian Houses, dedicated to the study of anonymous domestic arrangements around courtyards. These courtyards, descendants of the ancient atriums, the surrounding rooms and balconies of the stoas, had provided an intermediate space between the life of the interior and that of the public street. In addition they responded to the peculiar Greek climatic conditions of light and heat by being cool in summer, but warm in winter. But they were eliminated in contemporary apartment buildings and seemed to be gradually forgotten altogether.
There are about 20 houses documented in the book, most with floor plans, a section and only one photograph.

Most of the times the old Athenian Houses houses were positioned to the back of the plot. Towards the street there was a tall wall with an entrance door, leading from outdoors to outdoors, secluding the internal world from the public eyes.

These buildings were glyptic and configurated, invariably zoned according to use, privacy, and micro-climate. Sometimes many families shared them, perhaps each living on a different level. They were humble architectures, simple, typical in plan, purely essential and functional. Combinations of native masonry earthwork with lightweight timber superstructures, showing respect for the outside space, economic use of materials, process of accumulation, use of minimum dimensions on a human scale, improvised, with unconventional details and tremendous freedom in the way they are composed as a whole.

In other words, they were organically related to how people lived their everyday lives. With the many steps and levels, these houses can be seen as reinterpretations of the topography. Neither exactly natural or cultural, but the work of human hands, they can be seen as artifacts, often conceived with astonishing practical genius and inventiveness, machines that can be measured in terms of efficiency and the satisfying of needs & requirements.

The houses were colorful, but for economy the book was printed in black and white, so information about the colors was lost.
Content

*Old Athenian Houses, ‘House As A Machine For Communal Life’* examines types of anonymous architecture and transforms them in new paradigms, challenging their limits and connecting tradition and modernism. Without concern about aesthetics in the traditional sense and largely improvised, as is typical of vernacular architecture practiced by anonymous builders, it puts the focus back on the human user, daily routines, improvisation and compositional freedom, collective life and public space.

It engages with the question of how to appropriate a given shell moving the focus from the object to the interaction of the being with the plot. It examines how we architects can adopt and intervene in cities and structures that are already built, focusing on combinations of rule & exception, normal & eccentric, rejecting traditional notions of scale and promoting density and multifunctionality. It tests how to structure a house around communal life, rather than individual life.

Summary

The studio transforms traditional architecture into new domestic typologies, without concern about aesthetics in the traditional sense. It puts the focus back on the human user, daily routines, improvisation, collective life and public space. It puts the focus on appropriation and the interaction of the being with the plot.
Teaching method

Every student will take one house.

Part 1

The students will complete the projects by imagining the missing documentation.

Tasks:
1. Invent the missing drawings.
2. Identify 5-10 details or areas of the project that are unusual, surprising, or unconventional vis a vis construction method, design or the way they promote communal life.
3. Create a representation of the house (image) that makes a hypothesis about what the colors of the house might have been (vis a vis the Hellenic Houses series of paintings of Greek painter Nikos Eggonopoulos).
4. Make a model in scale 1:20, and photograph it producing new views of the houses.
5. Present the house through the above.
The students will create new architectures reacting on the now completed houses.

Tasks:
1. Propose new social programs for the houses addressing the matter of collective dwelling today.
2. Design the interior with specific furnishings and atmosphere, arguing about the politics of the interior proposed, with rooms that embody the most positive qualities of contemporary society and that empower the inhabitant.
3. Propose a new color scheme.
4. Update the model and photograph the new situation.
5. Design a specific interior construction and present it through a complete set of images, drawings and construction details.
6. Represent the new project in the form of a totem, highlighting relations discovered and proposed between its parts.
Learning Outcomes

• Invent and imagine how to complete partially documented architectures
• Draw plans and construct models
• Identify potential contemporary qualities in existing architecture
• Adopt and transform given architectures
• Reflect on the political and social meaning of domestic space
• Establish a pertinent formal language
• Apply representation techniques borrowed from artistic works

Assessment methods

Weekly Table critics
Intermediate and final reviews with guests juries