

TOURISM AND PROTECTION OF HISTORIC CITY CENTRES

THE CASE OF PLAKA IN ATHENS

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ABSTRACT

The text describes briefly the location and the form of Plaka, the oldest inhabited neighborhood of Athens, as well as its particular importance for the city's history. Reference is made to the serious problems that began to arise in the early postwar decades, due mainly to the growth of tourism, and the intensification of these problems, especially in the late 1970s. Presented next is the intervention plan aimed at protecting the historical character of the area, the principles on which it was based, and the legal and other measures adopted and applied, as well as the results achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Plaka, the oldest known neighborhood of Athens, is today what we could call the core of the historic centre of the Greek capital. In all respects it is a neighborhood that is linked closely with the history of Athens, since it has been inhabited continuously from the Late Neolithic period (3000 BC) to the present day, that is for some five thousand years. Indeed, in the darkest periods of the city's history, Plaka was Athens itself (Fig. 1).

Plaka embraces the lower north and east slopes of the rock of the Acropolis. It is roughly semicircular in shape, about one kilometer long and 350 m in average width (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1
Athens in the early 19th century (in white), compared to a part of contemporary Athens.



Fig. 2
Plaka today.

To the north Plaka borders the administrative and economic heart of the city – where Syntagma (Constitution) Square, the House of Parliament and some government ministries are located –, while to the west it reaches as far as the ancient Agora – that is, the Agora of the Classical and Roman periods – which was excavated by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens from 1930 until 1950. These excavations necessitated the demolition of a small working-class neighborhood. In its place today there is a large archaeological site, extending west as far as the well-preserved temple of Hephaistos, popularly known as the Theseion. At the other east end of the site stands the restored Stoa of Attalos (2nd c. AD), which houses the Museum of the Agora

Precisely because of its location and its history, Plaka is an extensive settlement-monumental ensemble, which includes monuments from all periods of Greek history (*Fig. 3-7*). It is also an ensemble that has kept the urban structure and organization of much earlier periods. Some of the surviving monuments and the archaeological finds indicate that at least some of today's streets in Plaka already existed in Classical times (*Fig. 8*).



Fig. 3
The monument of Lysikrates.



*Fig. 4
The Tower of the Winds.*



*Fig. 5
The gateway of the Roman Agora.*



*Fig. 6
The west front of the Library of Hadrian
and a Muslim mosque.*



*Fig. 7
The Byzantine church
of St John the Theologian.*



Fig. 8 - Earlier streets (in black) that still exist in contemporary Plaka.

Plaka acquired its present form during the one hundred years or so that elapsed between the declaration of Athens as capital of the newly-founded Greek State, in 1833, and the early decades of the twentieth century, until about 1940.

After the Liberation of Greece, the residents of Plaka began rebuilding their houses, which had been destroyed in the War of Independence. They almost kept the same street plan and followed the traditional types of Athenian popular houses, although gradually accepting and incorporating influences from Neoclassicism, which had already appeared in Greece, introduced here by Bavarian architects (Figg. 9-13).

Thus, old Athenian families as well as incomers to the capital, tradesmen, soldiers and craftsmen, dynamically formed a central residential area in which there was also provision for trade and education, as well as leisure activities, in its traditional little *tavernas*.



Fig. 9
Tower-house of the late 18th century.

Fig. 10
Popular house of the 19th century.



Fig. 11
Neoclassical house of the late 19th century.

Fig. 12
Neoclassical house of the mid-19th century.

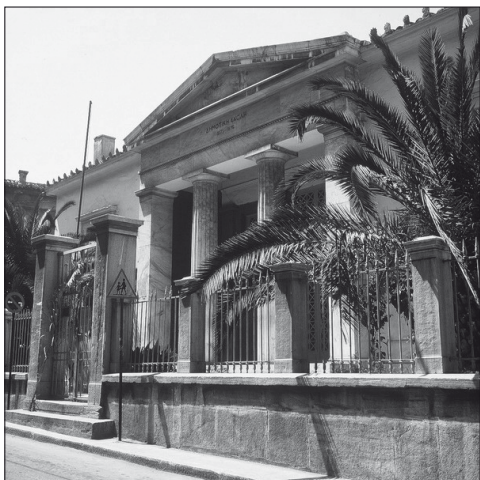


Fig. 13
The Primary School in Plaka (1875).

1. THE PROBLEM OF THE PROTECTION OF PLAKA

The first major problems began to appear in Plaka after 1950, due to the following factors:

- a. the needs of the commercial and administrative centre of Athens, which was trying to expand in all directions, and therefore towards Plaka too, during the post-war economic development;
- b. the sharp increase in the number of automobiles, the volume of traffic and the need of parking places in central Athens, especially in Plaka, to serve the customers of the entertainment venues;
- c. the great development of tourism and the consequent spectacular rise in the number of visitors to Plaka, which is a most important attraction, very close to the Acropolis.

Over the decades 1950-1970 the combination of these factors led to an uncontrolled and ever-increasing alteration of the historical character of Plaka and its disfigurement, in three principal forms.

- a. *Functional and social disfigurement* – Under the pressure of tourism and the functions that developed to serve it, the residents of Plaka began to move out of their neighborhood, leading to the break up of its social tissue and the replacement of traditional functions – residence, handicraft production, trade – by installations for mass tourism entertainment and trade in tourist goods-souvenirs.
- b. *Urban-planning disfigurement* – The urban tissue of Plaka, its small and narrow streets, were burdened with motor traffic and, far worse, houses began to be demolished and the resultant plots of land turned into open-air car parks (Fig. 14).
- c. *Architectural disfigurement* – The rather mediocre quality of the constructions of several houses in Plaka and the interventions made to these in order to convert them from residences into entertainment venues – *tavernas*, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, discotheques, etc. – considerably altered the architectural form of Plaka, very often in a rather vulgar manner (Fig. 15-20).

Unfortunately and unavoidably, all these led to the appearance of phenomena such as drug-dealing and prostitution, further exacerbating the problems.

Fig. 14
Parking lot on the site
of a demolished house.



Fig. 15
Entertainment venue in Plaka,
which is deserted during the day.

Fig. 16
The same spot at night.



Fig. 17
Lysiou Street is full of entertainment venues.

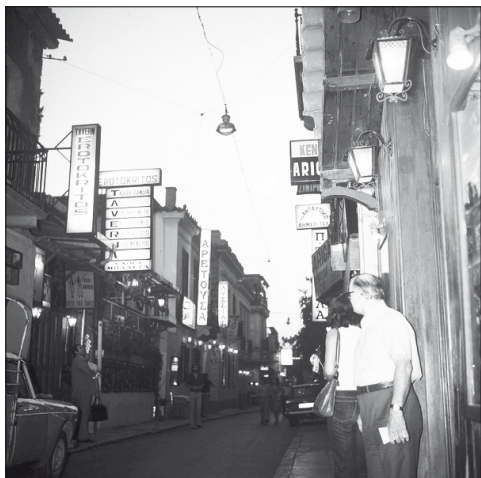


Fig. 18
Lysiou Street at night.



Fig. 19
Lysiou Street at night.



Fig. 20
*Souvenir shop and entertainment venue,
late at night.*

This situation soon provoked the strong reaction of scientific organizations, intellectuals, residents' associations and the Press. From as early as the 1960s, these protests generated public discussions, debates and deliberations on the neighborhood's fortunes and future.

Finally, after extensive and detailed studies over the periods 1973-1975 and 1978-1979, carried out by an interdisciplinary team of architects, urban planners, archaeologists, economists and sociologists, under the guidance of the author, a programme of intervention to stem the tide of adulteration and destruction of this neighborhood was drafted and approved. The Master Plan aimed at creating suitable conditions that would lead to the restoration of Plaka's historical character.

2. THE MASTER PLAN

The basic philosophy of the Master Plan, which was approved by the responsible Ministry of Public Works and began to be implemented in January 1979, was as follows:

- a. It was decided to protect Plaka as a single settlement ensemble, with whatever this included, and not selectively as individual buildings or small partial ensembles of notable buildings or monuments. It was consequently also decided to preserve it as a living neighborhood of Athens – as a residential area together with the co-consequential functions, as was always the case – and under no circumstances to allow it to be transformed into a sight of museum character.
- b. The intervention should have the sanction of the largest possible number of inhabitants, professionals and public opinion in general. And even more so when it was known that it would affect strong economic interests of the owners of entertainment venues and would curb the uncontrolled use of the buildings in Plaka.

It is stressed here that until 1979 the usual practice of the Greek authorities for protecting notable elements in the built environment was to put a preservation order on individual buildings and not on entire settlement ensembles. This would be the first time such a project was applied in Greece, with no previous experience, and consequently with

the greatest possible attention and preparation, and without strictures of time. In other words, it quickly became obvious that an appropriate strategy had to be devised, in order for the whole effort to succeed.

This was because by implementing the various measures gradually there would be sufficient time to ascertain their adequacy and to make any necessary adaptations and additions. Concurrently, it would give sufficient time for critical evaluation and for assessing the degree of public acceptance, which was particularly important.

To this end it was decided to do three things.

- a. To apply certain measures which would have an immediate and, if I may say so, «impressive» result. The first such measure was to apply a new circulation system for pedestrians and vehicles in Plaka. So, 50% of the overall length of streets in Plaka became pedestrian precincts, which meant the vertical drop in motor traffic, with the corresponding decrease in noise and pollution, and the restoring of a large part of the streets of the neighbourhood to their original functional character (*Fig. 21*).
- b. To carry out certain public works, such as replacing all the underground networks – water supply, sewers, piped gas, electricity and telephone networks, and cable television – which were in bad condition or not functioning at all. The phased replacement of the networks was followed by the phased arrangement of the pedestrian precincts and open spaces, and thus the restoration of their historical form (*Figg. 22-23*).
- c. To create a suitable legal framework of protection for the area, specially studied for the conditions of Plaka. For this purpose the following took place:
 - all the buildings in Plaka were inventoried and half of these – about 500 buildings of a total of 1,100 – were placed under preservation order and the terms of their restoration-rehabilitation were defined;
 - a special regulation for the placement of commercial signs on the façades of buildings in Plaka was studied and approved, and all the existing signs were taken down;
 - a special regulation of terms of building in Plaka was published;
 - a special regulation on the permitted uses of land in the area was published, main aim of which was to support the function of residence

and to adopt strict rules for the operation of entertainment venues. It should be noted here that 190 such venues, with an overall capacity of 18,000 clients, had been counted in 1973-1975 (*Fig. 24*).

The implementation of all these interventions and the application of the measures, which commenced, as we have said, in 1979, was completed in 1986.

All these measures were applied gradually and, despite some initial protests from businessmen operating entertainment venues, were quickly accepted. Residents' associations, public opinion and the Press reacted positively to the whole undertaking and a new spirit began to emerge.

Over these years, many things changed in Plaka.

The laying out of the pedestrian precincts, which were paved with natural marble slabs, so restoring them to their original form, as well as of the open spaces in general was completed. All the electricity cables above ground were removed and all the streetlights were replaced by replicas of old gaslights. The Ministry of Public Works funded owners who repaired the façades of their houses and, through the National Mortgage Bank of Greece, low-interest long-term loans were granted for the restoration of historic buildings. The noisy night clubs and entertainment venues that had made the residents' life unbearable were obliged to relocate or to conform with the new terms of operation, and numerous buildings were restored and re-inhabited, giving back to Plaka its old physiognomy (*Fig. 25-30*).

Many former residents returned to Plaka and many new ones decided to make it their home, appreciating the new conditions created in the neighborhood following the success of the protection plan.

Today, thirty years after the implementation of the Master Plan began, and despite the measures taken, Plaka continues to suffer strong pressures and to face serious threats. As the number of tourists visiting Plaka increases, pressures to operate new larger entertainment venues, supermarkets and other stores, which would once again spoil the neighborhood's character, are being intensified.

Automobiles are parked wherever their drivers wish, and the authorities turn a blind eye, unable or unwilling to impose the ban. In certain licensed entertainment venues the music is so loud that it can be heard in the street, something that is expressly prohibited.

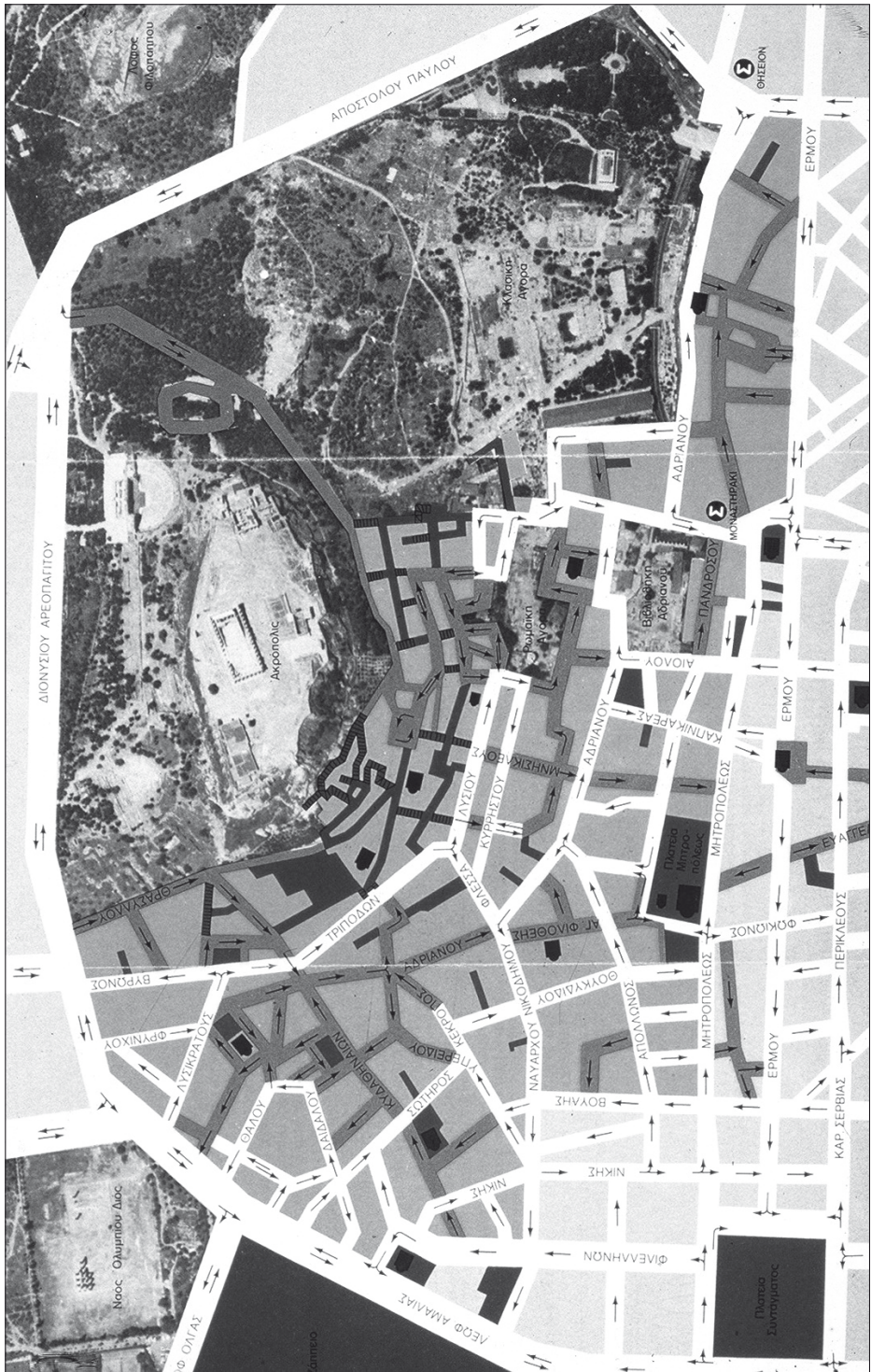


Fig. 21 - The circulation system for pedestrians and vehicles in Plaka. Pedestrian precincts are marked in green.



Fig. 22 - Adrianou Street after its arrangement.



Fig. 23 - Aphroditis Street after its arrangement.



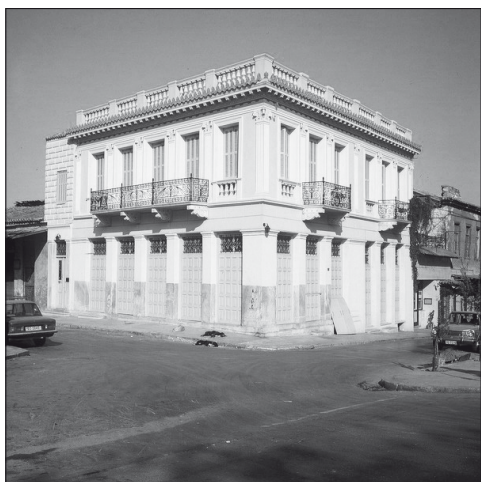
Fig. 24 - Entertainment venues, as recorded in 1973-74, are marked in black.



*Fig. 25
Restored buildings,
now functioning anew,
n Angelou Gerontia Street.*



*Fig. 26
Restored buildings, now functioning
anew, in Agia Aikaterini Square.*



*Fig. 27
The Neoclassical house in Fig. 11,
after its restoration.*



*Fig. 28
Popular houses near the Roman Agora,
now functioning again as residences.*

*Fig. 29
Restored popular house
in Mnisikleous Street.*



*Fig. 30
Restored house near
the Roman Agora,
now functioning again
as a residence.*

Many residents who have expended a great deal of money on restoring their homes protest at the authorities' laxity in keeping law and order, and are afraid that the situation will get worse as pressures become stronger.

I am well aware that tourism is an important economic activity of our time and we cannot deny its development. Nonetheless, we can, I think, ask ourselves whether this development should take place at the expense of destroying the historic and architectural heritage of our country.

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RIASSUNTO

Nel testo si descrive brevemente la posizione e la conformazione di Plaka, la più antica zona abitata di Atene, come anche la sua particolare importanza per la storia della città. Vengono riferiti i seri problemi della zona, dovuti a partire dal primo dopoguerra sostanzialmente allo sviluppo turistico, che si intensificano verso la fine degli anni settanta. Viene presentato in seguito il programma di intervento per la salvaguardia del carattere storico dell'area, i suoi principi operativi, le misure di carattere legale o altro adottate e applicate nonché i risultati raggiunti.

