

Athens Revisited

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After 20 years that carefree student has returned to Athens middle-aged; the eye is more analytical and cognizant of social realities, interim travel in other lands has sharpened these perceptions. Of course, Athens in that time also has changed, as has its function as a capital city. Poised between the EC and the Middle East, with the troubled Balkans to the north, Athens has become something of a buffer and outpost for Europe, and a centre for demographic transition. As a result, population shifts, migration, refugees, tourism, growth of industry and commerce, and the de facto absorption of Pireus into the outskirts of the main city, severely strain Athenian resources.

Two decades ago, there was a smaller, brighter city, with far fewer cars, aesthetically more attractive in spite of the ad hoc planning, (which then seemed quaint), with a centre more self-consciously alive rather than just utilitarian. The present city seems to dwarf its monuments, both visually and aurally. The greatest of them, the Parthenon, seems smaller and shabbier, even as its hillcrest dominance is diminished by the monotonous brown magnitude of urban sprawl. The conditions of upgrading make for greater pathos; scaffolding, grass growing in the roped-off areas, the patina of the stones dulled by pollution. Why, oh why, isn't the summit sealed? Wind-driven particles exact an inexorable toll until this is done.

Some things do not change much; older restaurants, the Central Market, various civic buildings. The hotel where I stay is the same one of twenty years ago, but now I have a room rather than the roof spot of the summer past, but I do like to sit up there on a fine day and remember when.....when respective currencies had a better exchange rate, travellers seemed more friendly and less self-absorbed, the getting of culture less intense, the locals more friendly, pleasure had a softer edge, and there was more carefree travel. In particular, for Athens, shopping and sightseeing were less onerous in a quieter, smaller city.

Today there is a harder edge to Athens, for citizens as well as outsiders. Money does not go so far, bargain-striking has an urgency to it for both parties, and people in the streets are now a different mixture of races and reasons. There are hard faces, sad faces, and beggars; only school children and students have open faces and timeless nonchalance. The tourist on foot is more wary, not melding, not open to interaction with the ambience.

Athenian identity is under pressure from population shifts, resentment of ethnic mixing, and the new standards standards being imposed by the EC. Hotels are upgrading, essential services like banks, post offices, public utilities, and hospitals are stretched as to resources and efficiency. Shops have goods, but the range is not so wide relative to EC standards, and there is a marked difference between up-and down-market shops, and of course, their respective patrons. Markets, by which any city may be judged, tell a story in Athens. In modern monetary terms especially, the markets here have an urgency that tells of an economy over-stretched, and a blind eye to the ad hoc and arbitrary solution of pressing financial problems. The market on Sundays is huge and varied, and sprawls down busy Athinas St. to Thission, ignoring the up-market mall in Ailou St. As in other smaller markets, no doubt many products are well-travelled and have stories of their own, to compliment their participation in the indigenous industry of tax-evasion.

Much has been said about air pollution in Athens, and the damage is obvious to the eye. (What pollution plus smoking are doing to human health is anyone's guess). The obvious offender is the motor vehicle, the consequence are aural and visual, as well as atmospheric; the checks and balances applicable to vehicle proliferation and driver behaviour seem nonexistent. The motor vehicle is a logistical tool, with usefulness only a relative factor, not a tool for extension of the ego. Is the average driver in Athens a dangerous petty tyrant behind the wheel or merely unsophisticated and poorly taught? Unnecessary horn-blowing certainly is unsophisticated, and adds to the aural pollution.

The recent claim that only pedestrians are to blame for their own fatalities is humbug; the whole population needs road-using skills and psychology upgraded. The spokesman concerned should get out of his own car and spend time as a pedestrian instead of pandering to the automotive lobby. For a city with First World aspirations, traffic control and behaviour are anything but; and this is helping to destroy the heart of the city. Objective consultants are badly needed for future improvement.

Sadly, other consequences of ad hoc town planning are only too evident. Many old buildings in the CBD are neglected or awaiting demolition, while neo-Bauhaus suburbia sprawls over the hills and far away, uniformly drab, shabby angles and porches, flat roofs decked with TV aerials, (the Mediterranean tile was at least interesting, regardless of condition), and mostly devoid of accessible parks or green belts. The result is wind tunnels of built-in obsolescence flavoured with auto fumes to the tune of irrational horn-blowing, and all this in the shade of the Parthenon and its associated ideals. Urban hubris, in fact. Oh well, enough said on that subject.

Now, to mix the past and the present. My favourite street in the CBD is Evaripidou, from its posher uptown end to the brave little trees of Eleftherias Square. The length of this street supplies the needs of life, as opposed to the wants which may be catered for in the likes of the Plaka. Traffic makes it difficult but I never get tired of negotiating the interesting narrowness, scanning haphazard shop displays, or taking glimpses into garlic and produce cellars as I pass by. Long live Evaripidou St. That goes for Cirri too; not beautiful but interesting. With careful planning, and a reversion to traditional forms when replacing some of the extant sadly neglected structures, a nice catch of small professional businesses could be netted. This would breathe new economic life into what could become an area reminiscent of the past, bringing back residents and helping to strengthen the heart of the city again.

Athinas St., from the Central Market to the Ermou St. Station, is another adventure, and diversions down side streets yield surprises. The Sunday Market as mentioned should not be missed, for interest as well as bargains; pity about the vehicular traffic, though. At the Central Market itself (not for vegetarians or the faint-hearted) the noise and action are memorable, and a meal at one of the cafes (24 hours) is a surreal experience, and not expensive.

As to the Athenians themselves, this is more and more a blanket term to account for those geographically located in Athens, and includes Greeks in general, expatriates, and a whole category (underclass?) of transients such as refugees, tourists, and black marketeers. Though 20 years has bought some sophistication, "streetwise" has been a great part of this, even with the advent of the EC. There is still too much of the seedy individualism expressed as bullying and emotional blackmail, still too many of the same shabby old scams in hotels and businesses. No new tricks, only new players; more danger for the tourist industry the city fathers would only recognise this.

Shame on those who demand a first world economy without changing their ways! How much of this applies to the rest of Greece? Living off history will only work while there is history to live of and the tourists, (ever the mainstay of the economy, and most are, after all, sentient beings....), keep coming. Other parts of the world are working more diligently than Greece for the tourist dollar, and with better natural assets: add their particular local history, with courtesy and comfort, all more aesthetically presented to the travelling world, and it will be no contest.

What of Athens in the future? Town planning should include green belts rather than green patches, certainly for health as well as aesthetics. Green belts as corridors, lungs, and recreation areas must be planned in. Cases could be made for more properly planned residential areas or even satellite cities to regulate urban sprawl. Also commercially useful is the pedestrian on foot, as citizen or tourist, buying, selling, using, residing, keeping the city alive as a valuable whole, and pleasant pedestrian experiences will further encourage them to linger and loiter, and hopefully to return. Driving to set destinations starves other urban parts, and creates under-served socioeconomic ghettos. Supermarket malls also do this most effectively, and this should be considered whenever and wherever they are planned to be inserted into a more traditional urban setting. Vehicular traffic should complement urban life, not dictate its very form and function, especially in settings where custom and tradition are the putative attractions and selling points for tourism.

Eventually, Athens may even get back to something more Mediterranean in appearance, and throw off some of that now newly-traditional cluttered drabness. There is a danger that a soulless urban desert, punctuated by browbeaten "historic" buildings, will be created, neither aesthetic, nor Athenian, and shunned by the rest of the world. An excursion to any high point in the city area will reinforce these points, graphically.

What now, in 1992, with the town planning and traffic problems, bad attitudes, and trading on the past? Remember this is the city with an eye to history, wanting to stage the Olympics, 1996 or any other year.... with or without an EU subsidy? The aesthetics of rubbish management, apropos such grand events, should not be forgotten either. The prognosis does not look good. Whatever ensues, one thing is certain, Athenians, and Greeks in general, are the only people who can rescue what is left of the history, take responsibility for the present, and recreate something for the future. Or is the national symbol of Greece an ostrich?

This was article written in 1992, and since then, the 2004 Olympics forced many changes in Athens, and in Greece as a whole. Those who have travelled to Greece for those Games, or since, will have their own accounts of what has transpired to re-create, enhance, or otherwise, the country of Greece and its capital, Athens, as they have always aspired to be presented, with history and traditions retained, to the modern world. As well, the EC is now the EU, and there as also the Euro in those same markets.