

# Municipality of Rhodes, GREECE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Greece is a country with an exceptionally rich cultural heritage. A serious part of that, constitutes its architectural heritage. The architectural heritage in the form of organised towns can be traced back in 17<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C. through the settlements uncovered in Thera, Crete and the southern mainland. This urban heritage is continued up to the present day. It should be stressed that many modern towns in Greece have succeeded towns of previous historic periods (e.g. Athens, Argos, Rhodes, Thebes, etc). That process has left inside our modern towns not only single buildings from the past but also vast areas that are portions of earlier towns (agoras, necropolises, etc) and entire historic centres.

Greece has a long history rich in economic heights and declines, long periods

of occupation by various rulers, diversity of economic, social and cultural development. One has to add to that the geophysical character of the country which combines high mountains, small valleys, long coasts and numerous islands. The geographical and climatic zones are quite distinctive inspite of the small area of the country . The climate of northern Greece similar to that of the other Balkan countries is very different from the dry , warm and windy of some insular regions. Related to the climate are the available building materials. This balanced combination of natural and historic characteristics has bequeathed to us an urban and architectural heritage of great diversity .

## 2. HISTORICAL OUTLINE

Greece was liberated from the ottoman rule in 1828 and was roughly half the size of what is today. The country was totally ruined after 7 years of destructive war. The most important towns from the economic point of view were in the part that remained under the Ottoman Empire (Thessaloniki), not to mention cities like Odessa, Trieste, Izmir and Istanbul where the greek capital was active at that time. The economy of modern Greece was based on agriculture at least until the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. The towns and villages were small in population and size, while their architectural character remained in fact unchanged, since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> c. the urban development of some towns, mainly sea ports, was based on urban plans designed by architects and engineers educated in western Europe. Those plans, advanced for their time, respected the surviving historic buildings and monuments. Athens was a separate case. Its original urban plans were repeatedly altered and falsified as a result of the economic pressures and land speculation that was developed in the new capital. The small towns and villages, scattered on mountains, plains and islands saw their population shrinked because of constant immigration to abroad.

After the Balkan Wars (1912-13) Greece was almost doubled reaching approximately the borders it has today. In 1922 the greek army invaded Turkey but the war ended up to a total defeat and a forced exodus of the numerous greek populations of Turkey. The impact of the disaster was a far reaching one. Arriving in Greece, those who survived (1,5 million persons) served as cheap labour for the developing industry of that time. The urban situation started changing quickly. The majority of the refugees was settled in towns. They built their own «refugee towns» next to the existing ones and near the industrial zones, on plots given by the state or illegally anywhere they found open land. The mass construction of social housing covered the needs only of a small number of the newcomers.

This way the more or less even evolution of the urban areas was stopped. Towns were extended without any planning and control. It took 10-20 years public services networks to be installed in the new areas. The development of industry and the 1929 international crash brought a new wave of migrants in search of work, this time from the rural areas of the country. Under these circumstances the protection of the architectural heritage of the country was indeed a secondary issue.

The World War II was extremely destructive for Greece and was followed by an equally destructive 3 years long civil war. The post war economic development imposed by the allies, provided for a light industry mainly supporting the building sector and services with peak mass tourism. The economic development decided, was named reconstruction programme. Products of heavy industry was to be furnished by the west- and later on by east – european countries. In the early '50s, state owned companies were established to modernize and extend the electric and telecommunication infrastructure of the country . In the mid '70s the goal was achieved.

New industries were established in and around Athens and in a few other major towns. The social impacts of the civil war and the hopes for a job and a better life in the cities led to a huge rural exodus. Between 1955-1965 Athens was receiving

14 new inhabitants per day. That proved rather destructive for the architectural heritage whether it was an historic building or an urban area. In Athens first and later in other towns the «reconstruction» took the form of an epidemic. Entire building areas of the centre of the city with distinctive 19th c. architecture and scale were knocked down, to be replaced by apartment blocks. Behind that «replacement» lays an economic profit: when rented an apartment building is more profitable, than an one- or two- storey old building.

At that time another phenomenon took place. The poor and unemployed migrating from the rural areas to the big cities could not afford a flat in the modern apartment buildings. They started building on open land around the cities secretly at night. The new «illegal» buildings was tolerated by the authorities that could not supply decent housing for the working class. The fascist military dictatorship that governed the country for 7 years (1967- 74) reinforced even more that uncontrolled development.

This policy resulted to a new amorphous city densely inhabited, with traffic problems, noise and atmospheric pollution. The same procedure was followed in most of the greek towns, whereas villages in rich plains or in tourist areas, in less than two decades, have changed their old housing stock to «modern» concrete buildings. In few words in more «developed» areas the historic towns and villages are threatened with total elimination, while on economic stagnant regions, mainly mountains and small islands, are abandoned and ruined.

### **3. LEGISLATION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE**

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> c., architectural heritage in Greece was identified with the monuments and ruins of ancient Greece (classical, hellenistic and roman periods). The Byzantine monuments were given the proper attention only after World War I. The Archaeological Service, one of the oldest state agencies in the country, was the authority responsible not only for archaeological excavations but also for the conservation of the architectural heritage. Archaeologists were the sole responsible specialists for a great spectrum of conservation activities, such as consolidation of structures, exhibiting architectural findings in situ, arranging areas around a monument or building, etc.

The legislation related to cultural heritage in use during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. was codified in a law in 1932. This law, known as the «Archaeological Law of 1932», has regulated everything that had to do with cultural heritage until the late '60's and to an extent is still doing so today. Nevertheless a historic town or centre were not understood as cultural heritage in that law.

A law enacted in 1950 provided the protection of single historic buildings built in the period defined as Post- byzantine: 1453 -1830. It is the period during which most of the surviving settlements in Greece got their architectural and urban form with which we know them today. Still the Ministry of Culture was seeing buildings and not urban units.

In the post-war era the pressures on the historic towns were magnified. Land and buildings became very important economic factors. The Ministry of Planning and Public Works responsible to make laws related to urban issues enacted a General Building Regulations which was regulating the allowed building heights, volumes etc. and it was valid all over Greece. It also provided for much greater densities and plot coverages than the existing ones. In architectural and urban terms the design of a future building had identical specifications either it was in a town in an island or in Athens. Taking into consideration the lack of any special urban plans for the safeguarding of historic centres, the lack of national monuments register and official documentation and the political will for reinforcing the post-war «reconstruction» and «modernization» of the country, one can realize the disastrous results such a policy had on the whole of the historic settlements.

Meanwhile both Ministries those of Planning and Culture, using the legislation that each one had enacted, had designated as safeguarded several historic town centres or entire small towns. They used different criteria and the direct results of these designations were rather poor, because they were not followed by any conservation study guiding to a decisive conservation policy.

The 1955 General Building Regulations were in use until 1985 when it was replaced by another law. Then for the first time appears in a legal text the concept of safeguarding historic centres and provided the general directions through General Urban Plans. Detailed city plans were delayed and so did the decrees for particular urban treatment of historic towns.

A recent development is that the Ministry of the Aegean Region is getting all the legal and administrative responsibilities concerning the safeguarding of the

settlements which previously belonged to the Ministry of Culture. Already teams of academic specialists are recording the architectural heritage of the islands of the archipelago, in order local by-laws to be issued for each specific island or group of settlements.

#### **4. URBAN PLANNING POLICY AND HISTORIC CITIES PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS**

Epitomizing the previous analysis we may say that the architectural and urban form and evolution of the historic towns in Greece is seriously affected by various factors and therefore they have a great variety of architectural and urban forms.

The issue of safeguarding historic towns as urban entities was raised in Greece after the W. W. II. The rapidly changing socio-economic reality of the country brought great numbers of rural populations in the cities. Tourism started transforming the urban functions and character of many towns and villages. These new realities lead to a tendency of replacement of the old buildings with new «modern» ones. That tendency was left to be developed spontaneously without any protection of the historic towns. Then it was raised the biggest threat for the historic buildings and cities. The problem was not confronted on time and the few measures were taken fragmentarily. The reason is that urban policy in historic towns, like the general urban policy, serve a deep rooted system of political clientel.

One basic problem was the total lack of national monuments register not a land property register. Efforts for a registration of the historic towns was made in the early '70's and beside its weaknesses, it covered the whole country. Eventually it was not used as a base, at least for designating and documenting historic towns and settlements.

Another important problem is the existence of two different state agencies which have the authority to designate historic buildings: The Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Planning, Environment and Public Works. They designate historic towns using different

criteria, aims and means. It should be stressed that between the two ministries lies hidden a rivalry. Last year a third Ministry that of the Aegean Archipelago has undertaken the authorities and responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture

The Ministry of Culture is acting since the independence of the country. It has decentralized services – local Archaeological Services – so it can detect and know better local problems. On the other hand the archaeologists are not the proper professionals to cope with the problems and propose measures for the safeguarding of historic towns with a dynamic development. The «Archaeological Law of 1932» refers to antiquities a term that includes buildings, ruins, pottery etc. The town is considered to be a group of buildings and not an urban entity. In towns designated as historic by the Ministry of Culture the latter should give its approval for any building permit (issued by the Min. of Planning) for the erection of a new or repair of an existing building. These procedures and the «oppressive» safeguarding of the Ministry that tries to keep the buildings fossilised have saved many historic centres and towns. For the same reasons many new modern street plans, providing widening of old streets, were not implemented in historic towns.

The Ministry of Planning, among other things, is responsible for issuing building permits for new buildings or the consolidation and repair of existing ones. It has local building – permit offices scattered all over the country but not in every town. Only in a few cases – usually in big cities – these offices are dependent on the local authorities.

After 1984 a great effort was undertaken by the Ministry to carry out general urban plans of all the cities and towns of the country that had not yet obtained on. The law of 1985 that followed refer for the first time to the safeguarding of historic centres and towns and provided for special detailed conservation studies to be carried out for each town. These studies were never executed. So those historic towns lack any conservation guidelines and policy. The Ministry is effecting its policy through laws that are applied all over the country. That way the differences between distinctive historic towns designated by the Ministry of Planning are leveled. On the other hand its usual practice to designate as historic the centre of a town, without applying zones around it, results to a modern town squeezing a small area of historic buildings. Such a policy refutes the substance of urban conservation.

The actual safeguarding in the case of the Ministry of Planning is effected by the Committees of Architectural Control. Their members are appointed by various public agencies and they work together with the local building – permit offices. They are called to decide on single buildings with loose criteria about submitted plans of conservation, additions, etc., but their decision depends on rather personal considerations.

A last but not least problem concerning the urban policy of historic cities in Greece is the lack of incentives for the owners of historic buildings who want to restore their properties. Although in the late '70's and early '80's there was state economic support for the owners of designated buildings and bank loans were quite attractive, today the rate of interest for bank loans for historic buildings do not differ from the commercial ones.

The lack of urban policy for historic cities in Greece, has led to the loss of almost 70 % of them. A great effort is urgently needed for the preservation of what is left.

The basic proposals of a conservation policy could be the following:

- The entire responsibility and authority for the application of an urban policy for the integrated conservation of historic towns should be under a single state agency. It should also be responsible for the conservation of all historic buildings still in use. The local services of that agency should be decentralized and well manned with the appropriate scientific personnel.
- The compilation of a national historic towns and buildings register should be one of the first concerns of the agency.
- A new policy of economic incentives (economic support, bank loans, tax exemptions, etc.) should be put in action. National awards for successful building restoration should also be one of the aims of the agency.

- The realization of such proposals, in our opinion, requires a complete change of the urban policy followed so far.

## 5. EXAMPLE: THE MEDIEVAL TOWN OF RHODES

An example that illustrates clearly all we said above is the case of the medieval town of Rhodes.

Rhodes is the largest of the Dodecanese islands, in the S.E. edge of the Aegean archipelago. Those islands were occupied successively by the Knights Hospitaliers of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem (1309-1522), the Ottoman Turks (1523-1912), the Italians (1912-1943) and passed to Greece in 1948.

A conservation policy for the medieval town of Rhodes started with the occupation of the island by the Italians. In 1929 an Italian Administration Decree designates the medieval town and the cemeteries surrounding the city walls as a monumental zone. A little later the cemeteries were cleared and turned into a green belt around the walls.

In 1957, under the Greek Administration, a new city plan is ratified by a Decree and in 1960 the entire medieval town is designated as «protected monument» by the Ministry of Culture.

In 1961 and 1963 new Decrees issued concerning the new city plan. They provide for the widening of existing streets and the opening of new ones. These are not implemented in the old city due to the resistance of the Archaeological Service.

In 1988 the old town of Rhodes was designated as a World Heritage City by UNESCO.

In an attempt to cope with the problems of the old town, the Ministry of Culture, the Municipality of Rhodes and the Archaeological Receipts Fund drew up a contract (1984) which resulted in the establishment of the Office for the Conservation and Restoration of the Medieval Town of Rhodes in 1985. The Archaeol. Receipts Fund is an agency under the supervision of Ministry of Culture and is the main economic supporter of the Office.

The basic contract concerning the medieval town aims at the enhancement of its historic and cultural character, the improvement of living standards and the development of productive activities. The objective of the contract is to produce city planning projects as well as restoration studies, also to realise restoration projects and carry out archaeological excavations.

The architects of the office after two years of research recorded the basic architectural and urban problems of the old town of Rhodes:

1. Commercial centre: the changes of the function of the commercial area to a tourist souvenir shop. Its uncontrolable expansion especially in the ground floors. Penetration of vehicular traffic. The falsification of the architecture of its buildings.
2. Residential area: No serious intervention in the urban level for 40 years. Low standards of living. Falsification of the buildings and cheap interventions by their inhabitants. Expulsion of the inhabitants because of the expansion of the commercial centre because of high rise in rents and land values, noise, etc. Beginning of gentrification.

The measures the office proposed on an urban scale are:

1. The commercial centre has to be confined definitely and its expansion to be prevented.
2. Access of vehicles to the old town should be limited certain hours every day.
3. The way commercial signs are placed and goods are exhibited should be controlled.

4. The public spaces on streets and squares, rented for the exhibition of commercial goods or for restaurant tables should be confined and remain fixed.
5. The Decrees of 1961 and 1963 which provided the widening of the streets of the old town should be cancelled and the existing street plan to be again in force.

The above measures were realized only partially. The Municipality ratified them with the agreement of the Archaeological Service.

- \* A regulation for the commercial signs and exhibits was put in action. It has the form of a booklet and was given to the shopkeepers.
- \* A detailed plan was authorised showing all the public spaces that can be rented marked one by one with their dimensions. As a result people consult our office before opening new shops or change the use of existing ones.
- \* The access of vehicles was allowed only until 10.00 a.m.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Planning and the agreement of the Archaeological Service, the Office produced a new Decree for the old town. In it the old town is designated as a town protected by the Ministry of Planning. It proposes a land use plan separating the commercial centre from the residential area, incorporates the regulations we already mentioned, defines minimum distances of shops of the same trade, provides building regulations for the few plots still unbuilt. In an attempt to bring in close collaboration the Ministries of Culture and Planning the Decree provides that the Ministry of Culture through its local Archaeological Service is responsible for its application.

The Decree was submitted to the Ministry of Planning for approval. Today, six years later. . . it is not approved yet.

Concluding we can notice that in the case of the old town of Rhodes we can recognize the problems we have already stressed:

- \* The town is designated as «protected monument» by the Ministry of Culture in 1960. The designation does not imply any special conservation study or clear practical urban measures, other than fines for the offenders according to the archaeological law.
- \* The existence of many centres of power and their overlapping jurisdiction is another problem. The health regulations, the building licences and the prices in the shops are controlled by different state agencies. The local authorities are responsible for the waste collection, the street pavement maintenance and the rental of public space to private business.
- \* A development policy has never been applied in Rhodes. Questions on the role of agriculture, tourism and primary production have never been answered. In other words, what kind of town (and island) we want to have.
- \* In spite of the obvious deterioration of its urban character due to mass tourism, there no urban and land use plans for the old town were produced.
- \* As a result no long term policy for its conservation has been applied.

As we have already mentioned urban policy in historic towns, like the general urban policy, serve a deeply rooted system of political clientel. That system should be changed and this is a political problem. As a consequence the question of conservation of historic towns too, as well as that of the old town of Rhodes, is essentially political. Therefore the solution can only be a change of the whole political reality in the country.