

**MANAGING THE PAST: RESTORING A 19TH CENTURY BLOCK OF BUILDINGS INTO A MUSEUM.
THE CASE OF THE “COURTYARD OF MIRACLES” IN ATHENS, GREECE**

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ABSTRACT

A block of damaged and dilapidated 19th and early 20th century buildings in the historic centre of Athens will be rehabilitated as a Museum. The Directorate of Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Monuments has to succeed a dual challenge: it has to maintain and preserve the architectural authenticity of each building and, at the same time, restore it in the best way in order to serve its purpose as museum exhibition rooms. The functional use of the whole block, the innovative solutions to the static problems and the regeneration of the nowadays-abandoned neighbourhood make this restoration project a model of architectural heredity management.

INTRODUCTION

A block of buildings structured around a central courtyard in the historic centre of Athens is going to be rehabilitated and re-used as a Museum. This cluster of houses, known as the “Courtyard of Miracles”, comprises the Athenian history within a few square metres [1].



Figure 1: The quarter of the “Courtyard of Miracles” in Stauffert’s 1836 plan of Athens

This quarter, which is defined by Areos-Kladou-Vrysakiou-Hadrianou streets at the southwest edge of Plaka, concentrates in a unique way characteristics of the historical, economical architectural and urban evolution at one of the oldest parts of the city of Athens. Remnants of the Late-Roman wall are embodied in 20th century buildings at the quarter, while remnants of the Ancient Agora of Athens are found in buildings of the 18th until 20th century [2]. Byzantine and post Byzantine churches (Saint Thomas and Saint Elissaios), and wealthy mansions of the late Ottoman domination period (Chomatianou-Logothesis' mansion), are visible at the quarter. The quarter has damaged and dilapidated 19th and 20th century folk houses (one and two-storeyed houses), as well as shops.

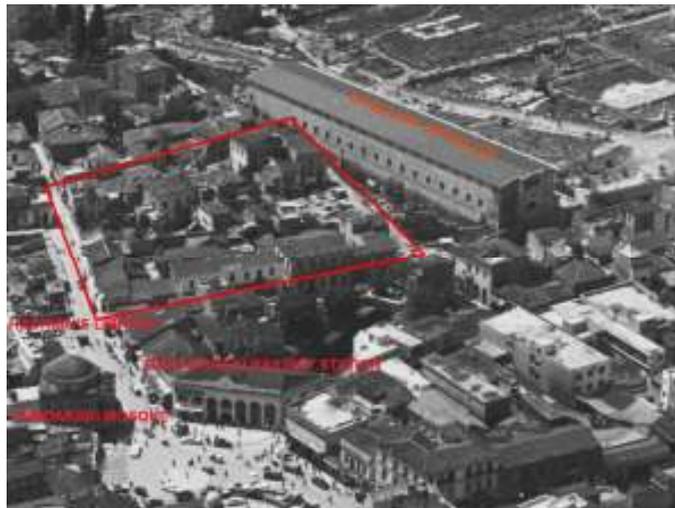


Figure 2: The quarter of the “Courtyard of Miracles” in the historical centre of Athens (early 1900’s)

Important historical monuments stand around the quarter. At the west side lies the Stoa of Attalos and at east side the reconstructed church of Saint Elissaios of Plaka. In completion of these monumental and symbolic borders of the Ancient Greek and Byzantine hereditary comes the so-called “Courtyard of Miracles”, a living monument of the urban planning history of modern Athens in the first years after the Liberation from the Ottoman domination. That is why the monument demands our attention.

EXPERIMENTAL: PRESENT SITUATION AND RESTORATION INTERVENTIONS

The rehabilitation study, carried out by the Directorate of Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Monuments of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, has taken into consideration all the different particularities of the buildings’ structure as well as the special needs of their re-use. More specifically, the restoration and conservation study aims at the preservation of the historic identity and the architectural values of each building, respecting the initial design purpose and the authentic features. In order to achieve this objective we must keep in mind the dual status of the ruin-monument and its new utility, which demands its restoration in a way that results in a safe and functional structure.

The whole cluster is built on the remnants of a typical mansion of the Ottoman domination period, the Chomatianou-Logothesis’ mansion. During this period, houses were simple, stone-built; the richer

ones had inner courtyards. Since the construction and decoration expenses were associated to the owner's social status and safety, building a house was rather important. The mansion stood on the three sides of the plot and a perimetric arcade permitted the horizontal communication between the rooms. A stone staircase, supported on a low arch, connected the courtyard with the upper floor.



Figure 3: The inner courtyard of the the Chomatianou-Logothetis' mansion

The inner courtyard is of major importance. At the restoration procedure the maintenance of its characteristics is crucial. The courtyard is paved with stone slabs. The courtyard helps the communication between the Chomatianou-Logothetis' mansion and the other houses of the block. The big stone portal, with Byzantine elements, was the only access to the private apartments of the mansion [3].

The family's church of Saint Elissaios, built at the south façade in 17th century, supplements the apartments and the every-day life facilities of the mansion. The church was associated with important personalities of literature during the end of 19th century. After its complete demolition in 1943-44, the church was rebuilt in 2004, based on its depictions and the archaeological survey material [4].

The other houses of the block that communicated through the "Courtyard of Miracles" are built according to their proprietors' living conditions. After the War of Independence and the establishment of the Greek State at the beginning of the 19th century, there was an intense building activity, which did not encourage the quality of private buildings architecture. The majority of the new-built houses covered just the inhabitants' elementary needs with renovations and jerry buildings. However, legislation prevented the improvisations and permitted the traditional house form to meet the requirements of the new Athenian bourgeoisie [5].

The buildings of the Courtyard compose a live architectural history museum, as they represent all the different 19th and early 20th century architectural types. The Directorate of Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Monuments (D.R.M.C.M.) has to maintain these special characteristics and bring out their particularities.

More specifically, the different house types have to be clearly evident. For example, buildings Alpha (A) and Delta (Δ), numbered after the letters of the Greek alphabet, carry the same characteristics of

the first half of the 19th century. There is a functional relation between the houses and the courtyard, rooms are arranged in a linear way, communication between them is mainly achieved by using corridors and moreover, external staircases provided access to the upper floor.



Figure 4: Topographical plan of the buildings in the quarter

Other house types have transferred the staircase to the internal part and all inner spaces are well proportioned and symmetrical to the main axis of the building. Buildings Gamma (Γ) and Kappa (Κ), on the other hand, form the typical arrangement of rooms around a courtyard, and thus succeed to combine traditional architecture and classicism.



Figure 5: Present situation: crevices and collapses

Most of these buildings are eroded by rainfalls and suffer from severe damages. The collapse of the roofs and most of the plaster, the detachment of parts of the walls and the rusting of all metallic elements demand the Service's timely intervention. Taking into consideration all the features mentioned above, as well as the re-use as places of assembly, D.R.M.C.M. is going to carry out a number of restoration works [6].

Particularly, the restoration project will include the complete removal of the roofs and the inner walls that do not bear any weight, whereas those that do carry weight will be divested of damaged plaster until stones and joints are visible. The most dilapidated walls will be partly rebuilt, using the authentic materials, so that the new parts will be completely embodied to the older ones. The stone masonry will have a stainless steel coat and will be plastered. As far as the water-tightness and the static strength are concerned, the basement level will be reinforced with a layer of armed concrete 0.15 m. thick and, simultaneously, special care will be taken so that humidity will not be closed in [7].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There has been much speculation and discussion regarding the management of the architectural heritage of this cluster. The variety of house types brings out the social and economic range of the proprietors during the past three centuries. Therefore, it is important to highlight the buildings themselves, as well as the museum objects that will be exhibited. The suggestions for the re-use are a product of cooperation between D.R.M.C.M. and the Greek Folk Art Museum and were solidified by the museological study. According to plan, four major thematic units will be hosted in the cluster, plus a special one presenting the history of the Athenian city centre, Plaka, focusing on the particular quarter. There will also be a room for periodical exhibitions, a special space for educational programmes, a library, photographic and digital archives, departments of administration and a small refreshment room.

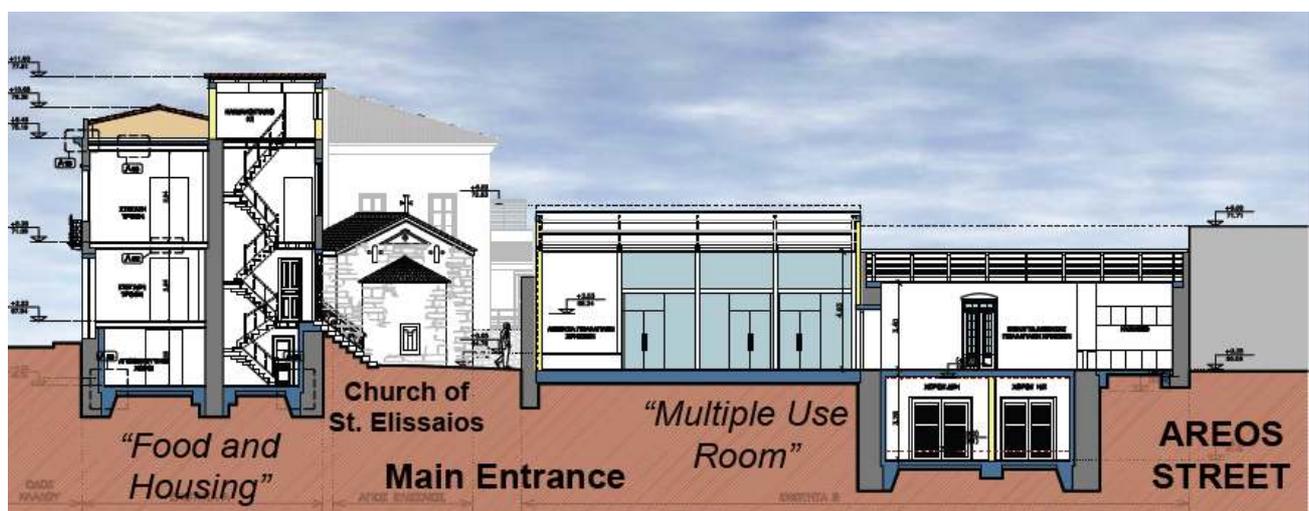


Figure 6: Graphic depiction of the new museum functions of the block.

More specifically, the corner building of Areos and Kladou streets, a two-storeyed neoclassical house with a cellar, was divided to two separate residences constructed at different periods, having

entrances from both the street and the courtyard. The neighbouring building on Kladou str. is mostly demolished, but its façade shows that it is a characteristic sample of folk architecture of the second quarter of the 19th century. Both these buildings, after their restoration programme is completed, are going to house museum objects of the unit “Food and Housing”. The main entrance will be at the courtyard, beside the church of St. Elissaios, whereas a special entrance and elevator for the disabled will be easy to use on the street level.

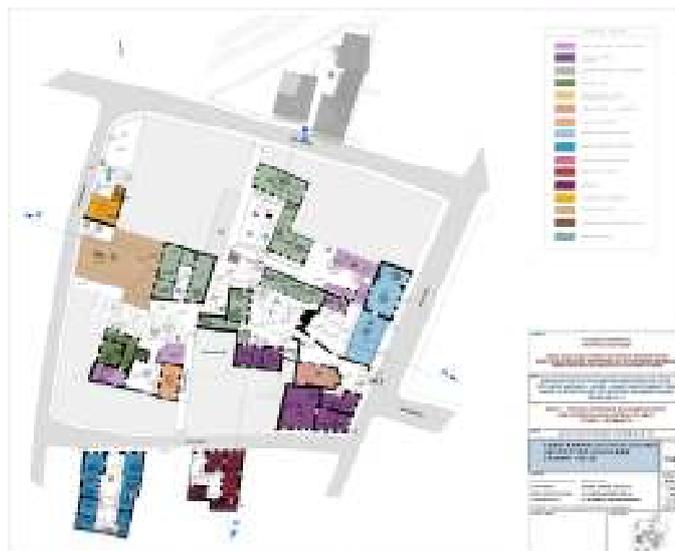


Figure 7: A thematic arrangement of the Folk Art Museum objects in the different buildings.

The magnificent stone portal, behind the church of St. Elissaios, leads to the “courtyard of miracles”, which played the most important role in the evolution of the form of the whole quarter. In addition to the portal and the stone-paved courtyard, part of a stone staircase leading to the upper floor of the Logothetis’ mansion and a well are also going to be restored and become part of the Museum. Costumes and silverware will be exhibited in the buildings around the courtyard. The smaller folk constructions, which used to be craftsmen’s shops, are going to house the workshops.



Figure 8: Present situation of the mansion that will house shadow theatre material.

The other stone-built buildings are going to be restored as exhibition rooms for objects of the “Art of Weaving” and of “Local History”. A two-storeyed building on Vrysakiou Street is going to accommodate the objects of “Social Life”, including shadow theatre, puppet theatre and 19th and 20th century theatre objects, as well as folk performances and masquerade material. Visitors are going to have the opportunity to look closely at the archaeological site and excavation of the Byzantine church of Saint Thomas that stands at the same quarter [8]. A footbridge is planned to allow to visitors to continue their archaeological walk at the whole area, after the future expansion of the excavation to the north. Made of safety glass, it will offer a view over the Byzantine excavation and its findings and will permit the communication between two parts of the block.



Figure 9: Design of the present situation and graphic depiction of the house that is going to contain social life material.

Moreover, visitors will be welcomed to stay more at the site and observe its uniqueness. For this purpose a three-building cluster opposite of the “Courtyard” is already restored and is going to house a projection and smaller exhibition room, a museum shop and a museum cafeteria, which will attract the visitors and provide all the useful pieces of information about the block. Thus, the “Courtyard” will regain its social and economic value of the past centuries, due to its architectural rehabilitation.

CONCLUSIONS

The Directorate of Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Monuments applies the most suitable methods in order to rehabilitate and give life to a dilapidated block of buildings in the historical centre of Athens. Thus, the area, which attracts a large number of tourists, will be developed in accord with other recently reformed neighbouring quarters. Using all the appropriate functional interventions, maintaining the architectural character of each building and respecting their initial design, the D.R.M.C.M. is going to regenerate one of the most important extant neighbourhoods of 19th and early 20th century in Athens.

The “Courtyard of Miracles” is not only going to serve as the Greek Folk Art Museum, but it is also intended to function as an architectural open museum. As the cross-streets will be opened and the circulation around and through the block of the Courtyard will be free any time of the day, visitors

will experience a time-journey to architectural history: various types of buildings following different architectural models, such as neoclassical or plain folk residences, small stores and churches, highlight the miscellany of architectural heritage [9].

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