

THE HISTORICAL AND AESTHETIC REHABILITATION OF THE ATHINAS ST AXIS

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Abstract

Athinas St is one of the busiest and most lively main streets in the centre of Athens, and certainly among its most traditional.

It might be described as the perpendicular of the triangle that constitutes the historic centre of Athens, as designed in the first plan of the city, prepared by Cleanthes and Schaubert in 1833 and modified by Klenze in 1834, which took as its model the town plans for the large cities of Western Europe.

Athinas St also marks the point at which the new neo-Classical city penetrated into the old Ottoman town, with its medieval street plan and complex layout.

In the original town plan, Athinas St was to be a magnificent boulevard with a width of 38 metres. It was to have gardens, squares and open spaces flanked by important buildings. At one end of it - on the site now occupied by Omonia Square - was to stand the palace of King Othon, while at the other, now Monastirakiou Square, the archaeological walk up the lower slopes of the Acropolis would begin,

In the revised town plan produced by Klenze just a year later, however, the original form of the street changed significantly. The amount of open space was reduced, and the palace was moved to the top of Pireos St, near the ancient cemetery called the Kerameikos. Nonetheless, Athinas remained an important street, and buildings of architectural interest and significant functions - the Municipal Theatre of 1880, the City Hall of 1872, the Municipal Market, etc. - soon rose along it.

Furthermore, such open spaces as had remained (Loudovikou Square, now Kotzia Square, and the Varvakeio Market square) were points of reference for the Athenians. Around them stood important buildings influenced by European urban architecture and the ancient Greek tradition, including the National Bank building and the Post Office.

The introduction of a tram line in the early twentieth century and the proximity of the street to old-style neighbourhoods such as Plaka, Psyrri and Monastiraki, with their numerous small-scale manufacturing establishments and shops, soon caused

Athinas St itself to become an important commercial street. In recent years, the shops on Athinas St have tended to sell tools and other items of ironmongery.

The situation today

Among the most striking characteristics of Athinas St today is the great variety and extent of its uses and functions, which make it a point of reference not only for Athenians but also for visitors from other parts of Greece and abroad, who walk along it on their way to the tourist-oriented Plaka district and the general area of the Acropolis archaeological site.

Athinas St is today on the edge of the 'commercial triangle', coming under pressure from it and from the -frequently conflicting - which have developed along the axis of the street itself.

It can be divided into two sections, both functionally and morphologically: the first section consists of the stretch from Omonia Square to Sofokleous St, and the second of the remainder of the street to its intersection with Ermou St.

In the first section, the buildings are largely devoted to office uses, administration, tourism and services, while the second section is primarily commercial. In the first section, the users are distributed both vertically and horizontally on all the floors of the buildings, whereas in the second section uses are confined largely to the ground floor and the upper storeys are, for all practical purposes, neglected.

In recent years, the deterioration of the historic centre of Athens has been, to say the least, obvious. Traffic congestion, the anarchic development of functions, and the ageing of the building stock have led to a fall in land prices and have reduced business interest in the area.

The Municipality of Athens identified this problem in 1988 and decided to intervene in the entire commercial triangle so as to enhance it, as had earlier been done with success in Plaka. For this purpose, the Municipality commissioned a town planning research project and a programme for the upgrading of the commercial triangle from the Town Planning Research Unit of the National Technical University (Professor A. Aravantinos).

The research project has gone through a number of phases and is still continuing. In parallel, land use studies have been completed for the districts around the historic centre (Psyri 1990, Metaxourgeio 1990, Omonia 1992).

The fruits of this campaign to upgrade the historic centre have included the pedestrianisation of the large parts of the commercial triangle, special traffic arrangements, the introduction of minibuses, the reduction of the permitted plot ratios, and control of land uses.

In parallel, the process of remodelling the squares, open spaces and public buildings has begun. Among the projects carried out along the Athinas St axis, the remodelling of the Varvakeio Market (including an underground car park), renovation of the Municipal Market building, accentuation of the elevations of the City Hall, and completion of the car park beneath Kotzia Square (for many years a gaping hole in the heart of Athens) have laid the foundations for reversal of the process of deterioration which has been taking place to date.

Yet despite these initiatives, Athinas St is far from having regained the prestige of the past. This is because the efforts have taken place in isolation from one another, without taking into consideration the specific functional conditions of the surrounding area or handling the problems through a strategy of integrated intervention. Such a

strategy would consist of specific programmes for action in the short and medium term. The programmes can be divided into four basic categories:

- A. Projects to landscape and equip open spaces
- B. Projects to restore the elevations of historic buildings
- C. Statutory arrangements
- D. Traffic regulation.

The first category consists of projects of the following types:

- A
 - 1 Pavement landscaping and equipment
 - 2 Refurbishment and rational location of kiosks
 - 3 Ornamental lighting
 - 4 Landscaping and remodelling of squares
 - 5 Signs
- B
 - 1 Reconstruction and restoration of neo-Classical elevations
- C
 - 1 Land use control
 - 2 Control of encroachment on open spaces
 - 3 Prohibition of the accumulation of commercial and industrial uses in neo-Classical buildings
 - 4 Control of building permits in terms of use
 - 5 Definition of ideal solid mass standards for new buildings, per block
- D
 - 1 The gradual reduction of vehicle traffic, with the pedestrianisation, in the initial phase, of the section of Athinas St from Sofokleous St to Lykourgou St.

The Municipality is already making rapid progress in implementing projects in the first category, which are viewed as short-term action plans. The procedures for intervention in all the other categories have begun.

The interventions of category B are regarded as being particularly important in terms both of their methodology and of the originality of the undertaking they represent, since the success of the programme requires harmonious co-operation between municipal departments, the private sector and an academic institution (the Athens Institution of Technological Education). However, our colleagues will be going into this question at greater length.

The historic and aesthetic rehabilitation of buildings

It is proposed, as part of the general policy of the Municipality of Athens for the upgrading of the city and of its historic centre in particular, that a design project be prepared for intervention to rehabilitate the facades of buildings along the city's main streets, with priority being given to Athinas St. This decision is connected with the central spatial position of Athinas St in the town planning fabric of the historic centre of the city and with the large number of scheduled buildings which stand along it.

The proposed intervention will improve the aesthetic appearance and the character of the street, bearing in mind its position and function in the centre of the Greek capital. Athinas St will acquire the metropolitan character appropriate not only to its functions but also to its symbolic role in the city and amid the timeless monuments which ornament Athens.

In these circumstances, the historical and aesthetic rehabilitation of Athinas St will, by Greek standards, be a pilot project for the entire city of Athens, involving the enhancement of a busy main street which is the location of the City Hall and Central Market of Athens.

Since the project will trigger a chain reaction in terms of its physical planning and aesthetic impact on the surrounding area, it will result in the upgrading of the entire historic commercial centre of Athens, on the western edge of which it is located. The project is based on earlier town planning studies which the Municipality drew up for the centre of Athens.

To give an overall picture, implementation of the project can be divided into three broad units:

- a) PRELIMINARY ACTION
- b) MAIN ACTION
- c) SUPPLEMENTARY ACTION

extending across various planes of intervention (statutory provisions, organisation of public spaces and functions, interventions in buildings, etc.) and accompanied, as a matter of necessity, by a series of financial settlements and facilities.

In view of the nature of the interventions, the historical and aesthetic rehabilitation of Athinas St is a complex undertaking. It calls for the correct co-ordination of a large number of interlocking action plans, the implementation of which requires co-operation between a wide range of professions, the collaboration of all the various civil service agencies involved, and the involvement of scientific bodies from outside the Municipality.

The stage in which the preliminary work is being carried out (involving surveying, the supplying of information to owners and the public, the settlement of legal questions and, possibly, legal action) will require particularly wide social consent and legal support.

The programme has been evaluated and judged feasible. The Municipality has ascertained that it is in a position to carry out the action required, and we believe that this will be an important starting-point for Greece, serving as a model for the correct way in which LGAs can intervene in their historic city centres. Implementation of the programme has now begun.

The paper consists of a brief analysis of the architectural problems noted, investigation and identification of the scope provided by current legislation, the manner in which the solutions arrived at were selected, and the plan ultimately compiled - which the Municipality believes to be the most scientifically documented, socially acceptable and financially and technically feasible solution. We now move on to a presentation of the process to be followed, which consists of a sequence of action plans whose implementation has already begun.

A. Preliminary action

A2. Inventory work - informing the public - surveying

A2.1. Analysis of buildings Recording of all the buildings along the street and of the buildings which affect the appearance of the street, with identification of the buildings scheduled for preservation by Presidential Decrees (those which are in the process of being scheduled and those which are of major interest).

A2.2 Ownership Identification of the owners of all the buildings along the street (scheduled or otherwise) and classification of them as natural persons or legal

persons under public law, so as to allow the obligations of each owner to be calculated on the basis of current legislation and to permit evaluation of the percentage contribution of each owner.

Legal investigation of the scope for intervention to carry out the works.

Listing of all the owners of each building, by percentage of ownership, to allow the final calculation of the cost of the works.

A2.3. Informing the owners a) Information of the public and announcement of the project via the media both at the start of the project and during its course (progress reports).

b) The provision of information first to owners and secondly to tenants about the Municipality's plan to upgrade the whole of Athinas St by user-charge financing, stressing the advantages of the project (such as the increased market value of the properties and a greater volume of business).

c) All the relevant civil service agencies and all the organisations involved in the project should be informed simultaneously, as should the various cultural and other agencies of the area, so as to obtain their active support.

If informed in an appropriate manner, agencies such as the Association of Owners of Scheduled Buildings and the local cultural agencies involved in the upgrading of the 'commercial triangle' may be able to make a substantive contribution to the project.

A2.4 Documentation of buildings

a) Investigation of the literature and other sources, identification of existing drawings Information will be collected about the date of construction of each building, its architect and its uses, and research will be conducted in private archives and civil service records for any drawings, building permits, engravings or prints, etc., which may exist. This research will make an important contribution to the correctness of the decisions taken about the guidelines for the intervention, and will have a favourable effect on the cost of the plans.

b) Photographic documentation Old photographs taken at various times will be collected, and the buildings will be photographed in their current state. 'Photographic mosaics' may be created by reduction, using the computer techniques at the disposal of the Archive of Athenian Monuments.

c) Drawings documenting the elevations The elevations of the buildings will be documented in the form of drawings on a general scale of 1:200 and a general topographic plan will be produced. The visible construction materials of the buildings and the wear and damage they have suffered will be noted on the drawings. This survey will be used as a basis for decisions regarding the specific action required (removal of signs, air-conditioning units, illegal structures, etc.).

AI. The legislative framework for intervention

A11a Invitations to rehabilitate elevations Notices will be sent to the owners or tenants inviting them to rehabilitate the elevations of the scheduled buildings on the basis of their obligations under the law (Presidential Decree 317/D/1988, 'concerning the preservation, repair and reconstruction of the architectural and artistic elements of scheduled buildings', Article 4, para. 1 of which states that: "The owners or occupants of the scheduled buildings will bear the cost of repairing

or reconstructing the static, architectural and artistic elements of such buildings and will be obliged, using their own means, to carry out the necessary repair work”).

A12 Sanctions Under Article 5, para. 1 of the Presidential Decree, “in the event of work being carried out in breach of the law in force, fines of between 100,000 and 5,000,000 drachmas, depending on the extent of the intervention and subsequent to a reasoned judgement from the town planning authorities, will be imposed on the owners of the property for having destroyed architectural features characteristic of the building”.

A13 Work carried out by the Municipality Under Article 4, para. 2 of Presidential Decree 317/D/1988, “in the event of the persons obliged failing to take action, delaying or being unable to proceed with the relevant repair work, this work may be carried out by the State or by the appropriate local government authority, the cost involved being charged to the persons responsible”.

Main action

This consists of the purely architectural aspect of the undertaking - that is, the rehabilitation of the buildings, pavements, public spaces and street-lighting.

The project will be undertaken by a special team from the Department of Traditional Buildings of the Directorate of Architecture (Municipality of Athens). Attempts will be made to utilise the architectural background work produced by various agencies.

B. Main action

B1. Analysis of material - general proposals

B11. Analysis of materials a) Analysis of architectural materials - evaluation

The documentation and the surveys will be used to produce a historical evaluation of the most important phase in the history of the building and of its most aesthetically satisfactory form (after removal of the various additions which spoiled it), so as to allow an overall decision to be taken on the form to be given to the building.

b) Analysis of building materials - wear and damage Field research (removal of plaster, trial sections) will produce a record of the construction materials, their condition, and the wear and damage they have suffered. It will thus be possible to decide:

- 1) What new materials (which must be compatible with those already in place) to use during rehabilitation
- 2) How these materials will be used.

B12 General proposals

General architectural study (scale of 1:200) a) The 1:200 survey will be used as the basis for a study of the general rehabilitation of the frontages along the street so as to improve its aesthetic appearance, style and character in harmony with its position in the commercial and historic centre of the city.

The metropolitan character which Athinas St should regain presupposes that its most important buildings should be upgraded and accentuated, and that the continuity of the urban fabric should be reinstated.

b) **Scheduled buildings** A study will be made of the spatial location of the signs to prevent them from adulterating the aesthetic appearance of the buildings and from concealing important morphological elements. The signs will be located after the buildings have been generally restored to their original form and after a decision has been taken as to the most representative phase in the building's history. The signs will be planned so as to be suitable for installation in Athinas St.

c) **Modern buildings** These buildings will be restored to their original forms and all illegal structures and additions will be removed. All signs and air-conditioning equipment will be relocated, since installation of them without planning has damaged the intentions of the original designer and the general aesthetics of the street.

d) A study will be made of a uniform colour scheme for the entire street, taking the particular features of each separate building into consideration.

B13 General economic and technical study The cost of the project by building, group of building and as a whole will be estimated on the basis of the economic and technical statistics in the possession of the Department and of data from Greek and international experience. The process of detailed costing of the work has already begun and is being classified by type of building:

a) composite

b) simple

c) multi-composite

B14 Proposals for new scheduling Careful research may produce instances of buildings which have not been scheduled but which are evaluated by the study as suitable for scheduling. In such cases, the Municipality will - on the basis of the documentation and a reasoned report - initiate the scheduling process via the Ministry of the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works.

B15 Special building specifications In consultation with the Ministry of the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works, special specifications will be proposed for new buildings, with a possible reduction in the number of floors and/or correction of their outline and volume. The purpose of these specifications will be to prevent obstruction of vistas to monuments such as the Acropolis and local or metropolitan points of reference. There will also be improvement of the aesthetic appearance of the side and rear elevations of modern buildings which are visible from Athinas St. Permits may be granted to the owners of modern buildings to make windows in party walls shared with scheduled buildings, in return for the action they have taken to rehabilitate the elevations of the modern structures. The above points will be formulated as Regulatory Provisions of the City Council and put into effect.

B2 Special studies

B21 Building studies

a) **1:50 scale surveys** The general surveys will be used as a basis for the preparation of detailed surveys of each individual scheduled building, showing all the morphological details which will be needed for reconstruction of them.

- b) These studies will be based on the surveys, on the documentation which will have been prepared, and on the current use of the building. The buildings will be restored to their most important form (in historical and morphological terms) after all insignificant later additions have been removed. These studies will be completed down to the stage of working drawings, thus allowing immediate implementation and the issuing of the necessary permits.
- c) **Structural support studies** Since the programme covers only the rehabilitation of elevations, static studies will be made of the structural rescue work necessary in the interior of the building and to support the roof when this is essential for completion of the external intervention and to protect the remainder of the building.
- d) **Lighting organisation of elevations** A selection will be made of the most important buildings which should be floodlit so as to improve the appearance of the area at night. Special studies will be made of the lighting techniques required to accentuate the masses and morphological features of these buildings.

B22 Other studies

- a) **Electrical engineering lighting studies** The electrical engineering studies necessary to carry out the work will be prepared in accordance with the architectural study for the lighting organisation of the elevations.
- b) **'Urban furniture' study** A study will be prepared for street lights, litter bins, bus-stop shelters, etc., in a style appropriate to the character of the street and matching each other.

C1 Completion of procedures

C11 Processing of special construction specifications - issuing of decrees and/or special regulatory provisions

C12 Scheduling procedure

C13 Financial procedures a) Loans

- b) EU programmes
- c) by the donation to the Municipality of Athens of the balance of the plot ratio on the scheduled building, after the services of the Municipality have completed the process of acquiring the title deed
- d) use of the property by the Municipality of Athens after the financing of the rehabilitation work by the Municipality.

C14 Financial reports a) After each project is completed, a report will be submitted on each property so as to allow the financial obligations of each of the joint owners to be calculated.

- b) The tables of calculation of costs for the projects will be drawn up in accordance with the schedules of owners of each property. The cost may be expressed in monthly instalments, in accordance with Article 4, para. 5 of the Presidential Decree.
- c) According to Presidential Decree 317/D/88, Article 4, para. 7, "the cost chargeable to the owner of the property and paid on his account by the Municipality will be collected by simple statements of debit, in accordance with the provisions concerning the collection of public revenue.

Taken as a whole, the intervention to rehabilitate Athinas St in terms of its aesthetic appearance is a highly complex undertaking which will require the proper co-ordination of a variety of interlocking action plans whose implementation calls for collaboration among a variety of professionals in the structure of Municipal services.

The processing of the preliminary action, consisting of surveying work, the supply of information to owners and the public, and the settling of legal issues, will be particularly time-consuming, and those who believe their interests are being adversely affected may appeal to the courts to have the procedure suspended or stopped.

We believe that a period of at least 12-18 months will be required for completion of the preliminary work stage, preparation of the necessary studies, and approval of them so that implementation of the programme can begin.

However, it will be possible to implement the programme if the Municipality is able to process the necessary action. We believe this programme will be an important starting-point for Greece on the level of proper local government intervention in the historic centres of cities.

Special application

For the purposes of presentation of a specific application, we have chosen the scheduled building at 44 Athinas St on the corner of Filopimenos St, whose owner displayed an immediate interest in joining the programme. The restoration project was prepared by the Department of Traditional Buildings and Monuments of the Directorate of Architecture, which will issue the permit for building work (granted free of charge to the owner by the Municipality).

It was decided that the Municipality would subsidise 30% of the budget for the specific work, a sum corresponding to the interest on the loan for the budget in question. Similar subsidies will be granted on the other scheduled buildings in Athinas St.

Historical particulars

The exact date at which the building was constructed is not known. However, it can be dated from old photographs and some of its morphological features to the period 1850-1870. The ground floor has always been used for commercial purposes, while the upper floor and the 'penthouse' have been used for residential purposes from time to time.

Proposal

The intervention being made today is intended to restore the main architectural elements of the building, returning most of them to their original position and form.

Such new elements as will be added will not violate the basic compositional and morphological principles of the building but, within its general spirit, are intended exclusively to facilitate the functionality of the shops on the ground floor.

On the ground floor, the original system of piers and the arcade, which have been severely spoiled by later intervention on the Armodiou St elevation, with removal of the marble facing and all other cladding, shop windows and metal structures. We propose to instal new wooden door and window openings, of which the central

aperture will open and will have a special area for hanging shop signs and metal mesh shutters.

A new canopy on the Athinas St side, similar to the original one, will be installed. On the Armodiou St elevation, the same canopy will extend only to the first two apertures, since the new canopy of the Municipal Market will cover all of Armodiou St, Filopimenos St and Aristogitonos St. Old metal corbels from the adjacent Municipal Market building will be provided by the Municipality and used to support the canopy.

On the upper floor, the cornices, the window frames and the mouldings will be replastered, the balcony railing will be repaired, and the marble corbels and floor of the balcony will be cleaned and polished. All the window frames and shutters will be replaced in accordance with the existing design.

In the penthouse, we propose to re-open an old window aperture and give the existing French window new railings. New panel doors will be installed, and all the damaged roof components will be replaced. The parapet will be enhanced with balustrades, as it originally was.

The general colour scheme will be ochre, with the protruding ornamental elements (cornices, pillars, window surrounds) in white and the door and window frames in dark green.

All the metal components will be painted dark grey.