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Issues of Urban Conservation and Collective Memory. The Case of the Asia Minor Post-refugee Urban Neighbourhood Germanika at Nikea, Piraeus, Greece

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Abstract

The paper presents the main findings of a research conducted at an Asia Minor post-refugee urban neighborhood located at the Greater Piraeus Region within the metropolitan area of Athens. The research took place from October 2022 to January 2023. The main findings of the research outline the issue of urban conservation in terms of urban collective memory. The paper explores the contemporary physiognomy of an urban Asia Minor refugee settlement that comes up against dereliction, uncontrolled building activity and demolitions of the old refugee houses. To explain the significance of these settlements, the paper combines literature review and field work. Field work includes original cartographic depiction of the exact location of the remaining refugee houses as well as documentation through original drawings of typical housing units in the area. The aim of the paper is to put in the forefront the issue of declaration in terms of collective memory in cases where the socio-cultural significance counterweights the architectural value of the buildings.

Keywords: Nikea, post-refugee quarters, urban conservation, collective memory.

Introduction



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Based on the book "Slums of Hope" written by Lila Leondidou (2001), there is a stark difference between official and anonymous architecture in terms of urban conservation. Neoclassical buildings of all uses, industrial architecture, public buildings and mansions have usually been meticulously documented even before demolition, while anonymous architecture is being gradually erased from the city's memory. In allegedly degraded urban areas, extensive demolitions alter the cityscape in light of urban upgrade. This phenomenon is met in the Asia Minor urban refugee settlements of Athens and Piraeus. These urban refugee neighborhoods are strongly connected to the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922, a milestone of the Greek history of 20th century.

Having a mixture of architectural morphologies, these neighborhoods have largely not been included into the official Listed Monuments Catalogue, except for a few cases. The neighborhood of Germanika is a post Asia Minor refugee quarter in the greater Piraeus Region. The remaining refugee houses have not been included into the official Listed Monuments Catalogue, as many other refugee neighborhoods in Athens. The socio-cultural significance of these enclaves is rather high; however, the architectural value of the refugee houses arguable. From this point of view, this paper provides documentation of the existing refugee houses, their location, number, state of preservation and architectural morphology, opening dialogue on potential selective declaration with the view to protect significant pieces of urban collective memory. The aim of the paper is to highlight the issue of preservation of this kind of settlements, with all the contradictions and controversies that it may imply.

The topic of the research is based on urban conservation, emphasizing on special cases where the architectural value of the buildings is questionable, yet the socio-cultural significance high. Some examples of the Asia Minor refugee settlements within the Athens-Piraeus Region, fall under this category. Despite their poor housing facilities, they hold tangible and intangible elements of urban collective memory, adumbrating a significant chapter of the Greek history of 20th century. The research took place during the Fall semester of 2022. Authors have chosen the neighborhood of Germanika in the Greater Piraeus Region, as a representative example, based on findings from authors' previous research.. Relevant studies on the area date back to the 1970s (Hirschon, 1972, 1984). Other researchers as Lila Leondidou include general information regarding the Asia Minor refugee settlements of Piraeus. However, there are no studies to describe what is happening in the Germanika neighborhood today. This research bridges the gap between previous studies and the contemporary situation. To describe the current state of Germanika neighborhood, authors have undertaken research tasks executed while visiting the research site and carrying out field work. The main methods used in this research include literature study, field work (and the methods used during it), analysis of collected data, and synthesis of obtained results. Particularly, authors tried to provide data for the following categories:

- _ Location of existing refugee houses within the neighborhood's fabric
- _ number of the existing refugee houses
- _ state of conservation
- _ Architectural documentation of a typical refugee housing unit

To be more specific, field work included land surveying and cartographic depiction of the remaining refugee houses in the selected neighborhood as well as documentation of a typical housing unit. Effort has been made to provide a well-rounded perspective on the issue of urban conservation in the area, by supporting findings through photographic documentation. Original maps, photos and drawings show the contemporary condition of the old refugee houses and their location within the city's fabric. As for literature review, authors delved into pertinent legislation of Listed Monuments in Greece making the appropriate connections with the international experience. The research concludes with findings for further consideration in terms of collective memory.

Urban conservation in Greece. Focusing on the post-Asia Minor refugee neighborhoods

Metropolitan areas in Greece have been gradually formed during different chronological periods. This is a fact that results in their mutli-layered physiognomy. Cities in general, present an inseparable combination of spatial and social factors that constantly interact. From this point of view, a city could not be perceived only as a field for recording social, economic and cultural parameters.

Methods

Theoretical framework

On the contrary, it has its own dynamic affecting human activities and choices (Leondidou, 2001). Cities are often described as time-machines since they are capable of concentrating different time experiences translating them into tangible and intangible urban elements.

In terms of urban conservation, there is an ongoing theoretical discussion on international best practices that may be applied in other socio-spatial contexts (Eppich, 2013). However, specificities of time and place set barriers to the implementation of strategies beneficial for other socio-economic and spatial settings (ibid). Prevailing official narratives of what might be perceived as “worth-preserving” challenge the essence of urban collective memory and community’s interpretations of living in heritage places (Katapidi, 2023). Nonetheless, cultural landscape management and heritage policies remain top-down, expert driven and state-centered in various cities around the world (ibid). Contemporary challenges on conservation frameworks, revolve around the balance among interacting factors of daily life and architectural priorities (Poulios, 2011). However, scholars highlight the importance of keeping the ‘organic’ continuity of the intangible aspects of heritage in a given area of study (ibid).

Focusing on urban conservation in Greece, there are numerous listed monuments of different eras in Greek cities. To be more specific, listed monuments in Greece have been categorized into two large periods; before the year 1830 and after the year 1830, based on pertinent legislation (Ministry of Culture, N 3028/ 2002). The second period includes monuments belonging to the relatively recent past; buildings as well as spatial enclaves. As for the spatial enclaves, the Law 3028/2002, ascribes significance not only to the morphological and architectural approach but also to the ethnographical, socio-cultural and folkloric perspective (Law 3028/2002, article 2, paragraph δ). Apart from their undoubted cultural, historical and/or architectural importance, these enclaves need to demonstrate consistency and homogeneity. Particularly, the spatial enclaves have to be unambiguously defined as a uniform entity with explicit characteristics in order to be declared as listed monuments.

Taking into consideration all the above-mentioned factors, enclaves of the Asia Minor urban refugee settlements could be included into the Listed Monuments Catalogue. They all have major historical significance as they are strongly associated with the Asia Minor Catastrophe, which was followed by a vast demographic flow of more than 1.500.000 refugees (Pentzopoulos, 1962). In addition, they all share a special cultural identity that shaped the contemporary Greek city. This identity was owed to a large extent to the social networks of solidarity among refugees and their descendants, after their initial settlement. The function and expansion of these networks had been facilitated by the intermediate outdoor spaces that existed in the middle of the refugee urban blocks (Hirschon, 1998; Tousi, 2014). These semi-private, semi-public spaces have been preserved until today, enhancing the contemporary urban grid with numerous small-scale open spaces (Tousi et.al, 2022). The strong interaction between social and spatial parameters could be perceived as a determinant factor that differentiates the physiognomy of these neighborhoods compared to the rest of the metropolitan Athens. It is also important to mention, that the issue of refugee housing is still timely, since it usually evolves to housing of permanent use (Dabaieh and Andriasyan, 2020).

Explaining the situation in Greece, in terms of architecture, there are some cases where the refugee housing estates follow the principles of Bauhaus while in other cases there are evident influences from the Asia Minor houses before the catastrophe, as presented in the pictures below (Fig.,1 and 2).

However, through the lapse of time, the refugee housing estates have largely fell into disuse; after the 1980s when a general upgrade of the population’s living conditions occurred, most of the refugee descendants moved in other areas (Hellenic Statistical authority, census 1981 data and Tousi,

2014). Since then, significant amount of refugee apartments has been vacant, leading in some cases to absolute dereliction. The small area of each apartment combined with the cheap building materials may have contributed to the fact that most of the post-refugee enclaves have not been incorporated into the National Listed Monuments Catalogue. There are though some exceptions, as the refugee housing complex of the Alexandras Avenue located at the central area of Athens and the refugee settlement of New Philadelphia. The Alexandras Avenue housing complex is a representative example of the Modernist era in Greece while the New Philadelphia refugee settlement derives elements from the houses in Asia Minor before the Catastrophe. In the case of new Philadelphia, after the earthquake of 1999, the whole settlement was declared as of high architectural significance and thus preserved through a presidential Decree of 2001. The Presidential Decree (Π.Δ./2001) included morphological guidelines for new constructions, incorporating elements relevant to the Asia Minor Refugee constructions of the interwar period as depicted in the pictures below.

All other post-refugee areas either have a few or no listed refugee housing estates (Tousi, 2020). Given the contradiction between the high historical and cultural significance and the poor quality of preservation, skepticism has been expressed on the future of these areas. On the one hand these areas contribute to representations of urban collective memory while on the other, housing quality falls below average when evaluated against contemporary criteria. Another significant issue that perplexes the situation is the ownership status; in most of the cases the refugee houses/apartments belong to refugee descendants, being no longer public property. In some cases, as in



Fig. 1

An Asia Minor Refugee housing estate that derives elements from the famous Karl Marx Hoff in Vienna found in poor preservation, located in Palia Kokkinia, near the area of study Tousi E., field work 2022



Fig. 2

Asia Minor refugee building block in Nikea, a few blocks from the neighborhood of study (Germanika). The housing complex derives elements from the houses located in Asia Minor before the catastrophe. Tousi E., 2022, field work



Fig. 3

New construction in New Philadelphia after the Presidential Decree of 200, Tousi 2014

Fig. 4

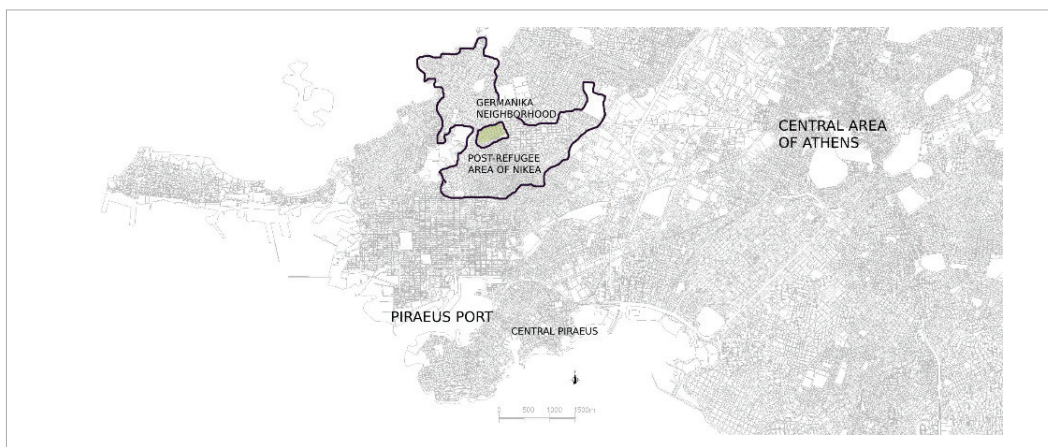
Interwar refugee construction in New Philadelphia, Tousei, 2014

**Fig. 5**

Depiction of the Germanika neighborhood in the contemporary urban grid, authors' work, background map, National Technical University of Athens, School of Architecture, Laboratory of Spatial Planning and GIS

**Fig. 6**

Location of Germanika neighborhood within the Athens metropolitan region, authors work, 2022



the example analyzed in this paper, local municipal authorities have purchased derelict ex-refugee houses so as to preserve them. In the following chapters, authors provide cartographic depiction of the existing refugee houses in Germanika and architectural documentation of a typical housing unit so as to open dialogue on the cultural and architectural value of these houses, as parts of tangible and intangible heritage.

Results of the Analysis of the Germanika Neighborhood

Past and Present

The area of Germanika, is located within the Piraeus Prefecture, in the metropolitan region of Athens, the capital of Greece (Fig.6). It is a part of the Municipality of Nikea-Agios Ioannis Rentis (Fig.5). The urban history of the municipality of Nikea has been strongly connected to the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922. Before the refugee inflow the area has not presented any kind of cohesive urban fabric. After 1922, the area hosted different refugee quarters, designed on a Hippodamian grid. As for the case of Germanika, in 1927, an almost rectangular area of 400x200 meters was divided into 32 city blocks of about 50x35 meters. In parallel, the road network was organized around the city blocks with roads of 10 meters width, connecting Germanika to the southern part of Nikea where an older refugee settlement existed (Hirschon, 1998).

Each city block had been separated into 20 plots in which 10 prefabricated ground-floor constructions had been placed. Each construction was made of asbestos panels, including twin dwellings of the same morphology, area and structure, covered by a common tiled roof. These set of dwellings had been organized around a common yard in the middle of each city block. This form of urban design could be described as typical for the refugee settlements of the interwar period (Sarigiannis, 2000). Most of the Asia Minor Refugee settlements in Nikaia and in other urban

enclaves of Attica, share common attributes as the common yard and the scattered pedestrian routes. Particularly in cases of clear Hippodamian grid, each city block used as focal point a multifunctional semi-private/semi-public space, suitable for social interaction (Tousi et al., 2022). Each dwelling was around 4,5x9 meters having three main rooms and a small restroom. Exterior walls had a wooden frame where double asbestos panels (Fig.7.) had been interlocked, while interior walls had a single asbestos panel. By the end of 1927, 276 prefabricated dwellings had been distributed to 552 families (ibid). According to Renee Hirschon (1998) despite the high population density and the poor housing facilities, the neighborhood of Germanika presented a pleasant and decent image. On the other hand, De Beauvoir (1965), expresses a completely different point of view; in spite of the vivid colors the Asia Minor refugee quarters of Piraeus disclosed extreme poverty within their boundaries. The socio-spatial inequalities met in the refugee areas have been explicitly addressed in Lila's Leondidou work (2017). Poor housing conditions and lack of social cohesion characterized the Athens-Piraeus metropolitan area, after the refugee settlement.

During the first decades, the Germanika neighborhood had not been connected to public sewage system and there was scarcity of potable water. Population density was higher than in other refugee settlements (450 people per 10 acres), especially during the first postwar period (ibid). This pressure for further expansion of residential space evoked the occupation of public space; pavements and common yards had been gradually filled with illegal housing extensions. Another interesting feature, is the illegal undercut additions to the initial housing units, as described in Renee Hirschon's study (1998). These undercut constructions were made feasible because of the form of the initial construction. To be more specific, the prefabricated houses had been placed on an elevated plinth, over a backfill of gravel. A low-cost solution for expanding domestic space, was to excavate under the plinth so as to reach an acceptable depth, providing sanitary living conditions. The undercut constructions were made of stone, a typical building material of that period. The width of the walls varied from 60cm to 80cm.



Fig. 7

Contemporary condition of initial building materials (wooden frames and asbestos panels) in the area of Germanika, authors' field work 2022

The elevated floor of the initial building served as the roof of the undercut addition, while the void until road level was suitable for opening windows. This strategy to expand living space, became so popular that all refugee houses in Germanika were gradually modified. This phenomenon had also socio-cultural significance; it was interconnected with bride price, at least until the late 1970s (Hirschon 1998 and Tousi, 2014). The result of this strategy was a matrilocal residential pattern, observed also by other researchers (Leondidou, 2001). Remnants of these constructions are evident until today, as depicted in the pictures below (Fig. 8). Another noteworthy attribute, is the use of bright and vivid colors on the facades. Based on Lisa's Micheli study (1992), the use of color was observed in Asia Minor before the Catastrophe, having an additional cultural value for the descendants of the refugee population (Fig.9)

Fig. 8

Occupation of public space as a strategy to expand the limited residential space, author's field work 2022



Fig. 9

Vivid colors on the façades, authors' field work 2022



As for the social synthesis of the area, the first inhabitants of the area of study, came from different regions and belonged to different socio-economic strata. Thus, bonds among households had been only rare. Because of the fact that the refugee population had been subject to social exclusion, a local network of support emerged after the first years of their settlement. The conscious character of social

interaction at the micro-scale of the city had been owed to a large extent to the spatial and social exclusion of the neighborhood of Germanika. This phenomenon has been meticulously analyzed by Renee Hirschon from the lens of territoriality at larger spatial scale (Hirschon and Gold, 1982). There is also another interpretation that is relevant to the layout of the city before the Catastrophe. In Smyrna, the city was divided into different quarters based on the community of origin of their inhabitants (Hirschon, 1998). After settling in Germanika, the communal outdoor space in the middle of each city block facilitated social interaction and exchange, ascribing a special value to public space. In the aftermath of the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the area shaped a common identity based on the experience of the violent displacement, the special cultural attributes and the common political beliefs (Katsapis, 2002).

Semi-private, semi-public spaces formed the physiognomy of Germanika based on gender roles and stereotypes. The social networks had been mostly supported by women's activities (Leondidou, 2001). This fact was associated with the strong presence of women in domestic space until the early 1980s. According to Renee Hirschon's study (1998), public and private sphere interacted and complemented each other, rather than being adversarial. Women acted as catalysts that bridged the gap between public and private space. Other ethnographers as Ernestine Friedl ([1967] 1986), claim that women's power on space is not inferior, given the significance of nuclear family on the societal organization of Greece. Deriving elements from this approach, later ethnographers of the Greek society, acknowledge the importance of the role of women in public and domestic space (Salamone and Stanton, 1986).

An accurate description of the interaction between public and private space in the refugee quarters, is offered by Lila Leondidou in her book "Slums of Hope" (2001); common yards hosted self-made kitchens, workshops and other auxiliary spaces where women developed an original form of cooperation and solidarity. However, after the late 1970s, the flats-for-land system led to demolitions of old refugee houses in favor of new housing constructions. Through this procedure the urban fabric was radically changed. In all cases the common yard was divided into plots, after sharing

homeownership to the descendants of the refugee population (Fig.10). The map below depicts field work findings regarding the number and exact location of the remaining refugee houses, as well as the empty plots after the demolition of the refugee ground floor constructions.



Fig. 10

Map of Germanika with the remaining refugee houses and the empty lots, authors' field work December 2022

Based on field work, the majority of the old refugee houses have fell into disuse while only a few have been preserved. The cases of conservation include replacement of building materials, keeping untouched the initial outline of the building (Fig.11). Today, the prevailing land uses in the area comprise residences, local stores and educational facilities. The neighborhood is close to the new metro stations (blue line from airport to Piraeus port). The closest is located 850 m away and the other 1,2 Km. Prices of land vary from 1400 euros per square meter to 1050 euros/m² in the wider area.



Fig. 11

Preserved Asia Minor refugee ground floor constructions in Germanika with undercut additions, authors' field work, 2022

The demolition of the old ground-floor constructions leads to the emergence of small lots (approximately 4 x 9 m) that do not meet the contemporary standards for building restrictions (less façade than required on the main road). As presented in the pictures below (Fig.12), a network of

scattered small-scale open spaces has appeared during the past few years. These small green enclaves could benefit the dense urban core of the area when used as open public spaces, following the necessary legal process.

Fig. 12

Empty lots in the area of study after the demolition of the old refugee houses, authors' field work, November 2022



A Typical Housing Unit in Germanika

As mentioned in previous chapters, all ground-floor constructions were modified by adding extra spaces to the initial housing unit. One of the most popular strategies is the addition of undercut constructions. From this point of view, the selected case study is a representative example. Below are the architectural drawings of the building (plans, sections and elevations) with comments regarding building materials and construction methods. These drawings are the result of land surveying and field work, presenting original depictions of the contemporary condition of a refugee house in the area of study.

One noteworthy finding of the research, is the presence of small kitchens scattered in small corners of the building (undercut under the pavements, under the staircases etc.). The area they cover is surprisingly small; around 2 m². However, their existence assured the autonomy of each household. Especially during the 1960s and the 1970s, more than one household used to live in the same house (relatives from woman's side). This kind of proximity revealed contradictory aspects of daily life. On the one hand, there was cooperation and interdependency and on the other, loose boundaries of private space. Having separated kitchens, provided a unique sense of independence (Hirschon, 1998). Remnants of these constructions are found today within the undercut constructions, as depicted in the plan below (Fig.13).

Other additions to the initial housing unit, involve ground-floor constructions at the common yard expanding horizontally the living space of the dwelling. One such example is presented below in the 1st floor plan of the selected building (Fig. 14). As depicted in the sections (Fig. 16, 17, 18), the height of each floor is relatively low and the configuration of interior space does not follow ergonomic principles. In terms of morphology, the dwelling is an assemblage of different eras, combining initial building materials to contemporary additions. Vivid colors on the façade, wooden details under the tiled roof and decorative metal balustrades, reflect the aesthetics of working-class households of the mid-twentieth century in Athens. However, the conservation of these dwellings has a high symbolic value; it reflects the struggles and difficulties of the Asia Minor refugee population, describing a significant chapter of Greece's urban history.



Fig. 13

Plan of the undercut construction, authors' work, October 2022

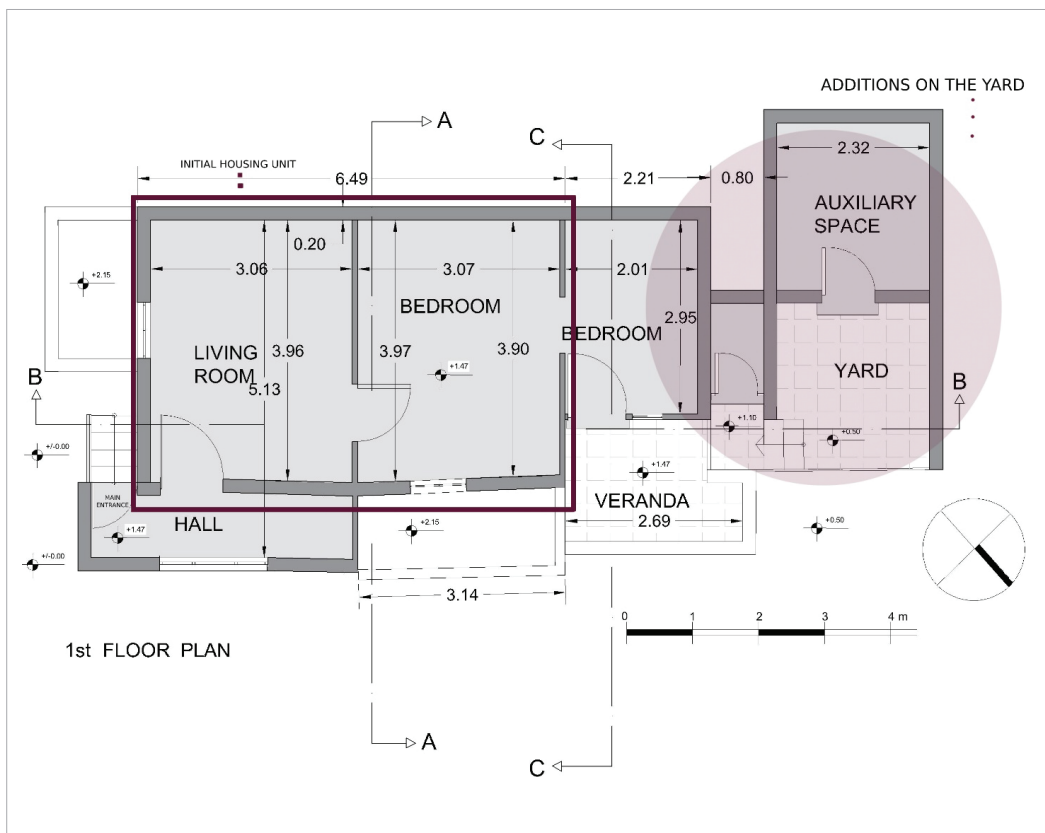


Fig. 14

Plan of the 1st floor, authors' work, October 2022

Fig. 15

Masterplan, authors' work, October 2022

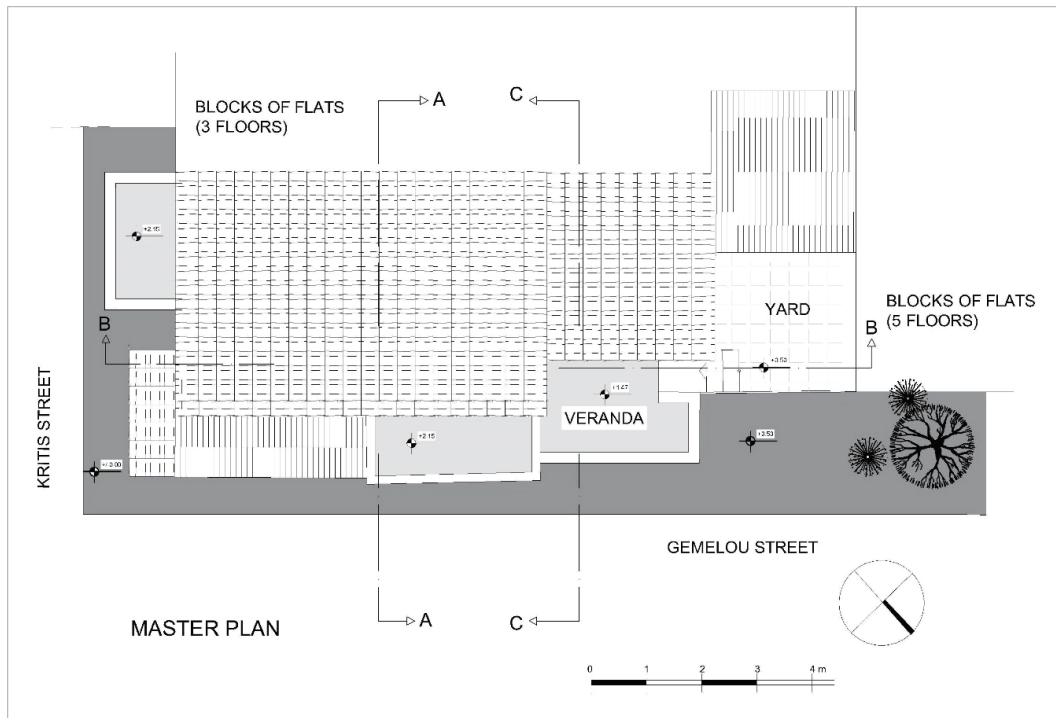


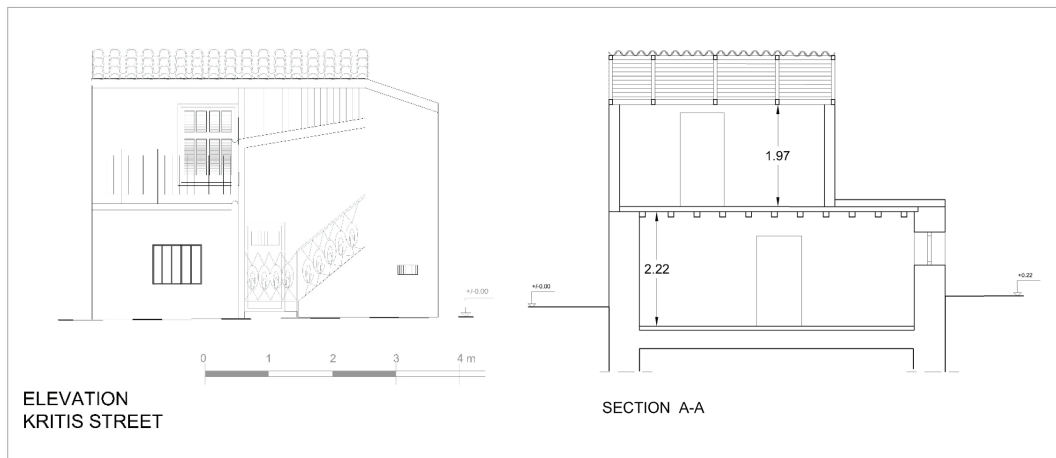
Fig. 16

Elevation, Gemelou Street and representative morphological features, authors' work, October 2022



Fig. 17

Elevation Kritis street and section A-A, authors' work, October 2022



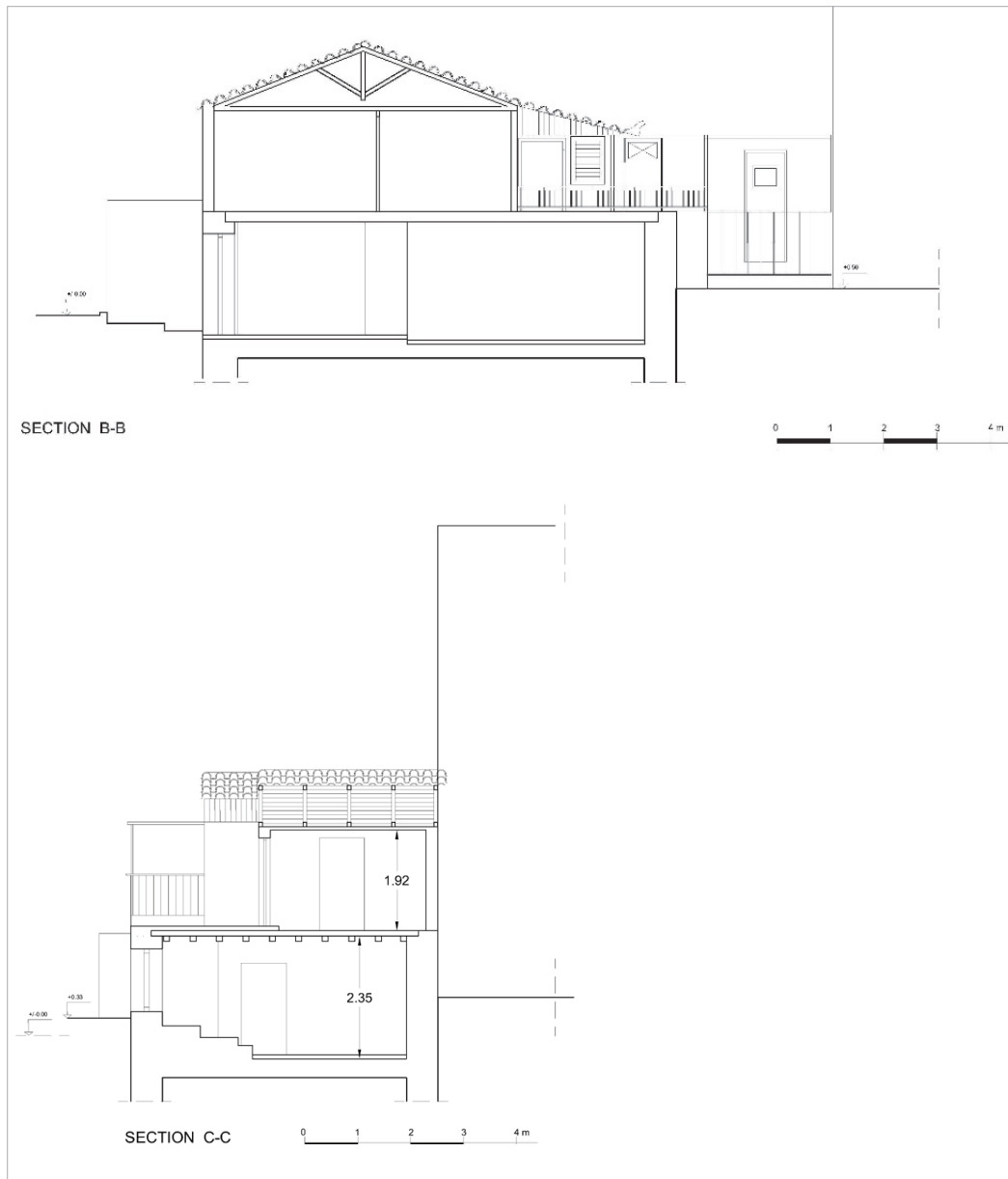


Fig. 18

Section B-B and Section C-C, authors' work, October 2022

The area of study is a post refugee urban settlement founded during the interwar period (1927). These refugee dwellings have been constructed with cheap materials (asbestos panels). Through the lapse of time, the need to provide extra space led to illegal additions to the initial housing units. These additions followed a specific pattern owed to a large extent to the type of initial construction. Thus, undercut stone-made constructions and horizontal expansion on the yards shaped the urban topography of the area. This phenomenon was also associated with socio-economic parameters. On the one hand the bride price and on the other the low incomes, concluded in quick and cheap solutions for housing.

After the 1980s, the area of study experienced significant socio-spatial transformations because of the flats-for-land system. According to literature, the flats-for-land system shaped the socio-spatial physiognomy of Athens (Maloutas, 2015). As for the refugee urban settlements, field work revealed that, mergers of separated ownerships provided larger plots for applying the flats-for-land system.

Discussion and Conclusions

Gradually, the majority of the Germanika ground-floor constructions were substituted by modern blocks of flats, offering better housing conditions. However, a considerable number of the old refugee houses is still preserved. Most of these refugee houses demonstrate poor housing conditions and almost half of them are derelict. The consequences of long-term dereliction are linked to the relatively low prices of land in the area. The inability of the homeowners to cover the expenses of restoration has multiplier effects on the physiognomy of the neighborhood. In addition, the demolition of the small ground-floor constructions leaves small plots that fail to comply with the contemporary building restrictions and regulations. To look in depth the case of potential declaration, one should delve into the specificities of the case so as to acquire a well-rounded view on the following parameters:

- _ Number and exact location of the ex-refugee housing complexes
- _ Quality of preservation
- _ Ownership status/ conflicts and interests
- _ Neighboring land uses/ potential new uses after the declaration
- _ Architecture/morphology
- _ Socio-cultural significance

In this context, innovative solutions could benefit the area and also protect the tangible elements of collective memory. Given the small area of the existing refugee houses and the poor quality of building materials, official authorities should consider alternative uses for the refugee houses except for residential. Moreover, the presence of the small empty lots could shape a network of small scale open green spaces, beneficial for the dense urban core of the area. Focusing on the case of Germanika one could claim that there is lots of room for further improvement. This means that emphasis should be given on the contradiction between the high cultural value of the area and the poor state of preservation (cheap building materials, illegal additions, occupation of public space). A special set of regulations, including economic incentives, could benefit the restoration of the old refugee houses, conserving significant tangible elements of the urban collective memory.

Reflecting on good practices implemented on settlements of similar background in Greece, the case of New Philadelphia in Athens, presents adequate consistency and homogeneity, preserving tangible elements of the Asia Minor refugee past. In this specific case, as mentioned before, the whole settlement was declared, and also morphological architectural regulations have been imposed since 2001 to new constructions. These two strategies helped to keep elements of urban collective memory, to preserve the scale and urban topography of the initial settlement and to assure the conservation of the communal outdoor spaces. Following this example, other urban settlements of similar background, could benefit from the application of such policies. In respect of special socio-economic and spatial attributes, further research should delve into the selected case study so as to indicate methods and strategies for urban conservation, taking into account the international experience on the field.

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