

## Two Reverse Urban Artifacts in Athens

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THE INDIVIDUALITY OF URBAN ARTIFACTS,  
ARCHITECTURE  
Athens



The Athens Cathedral (left) and the Church of St. Eleftherios (right). Photograph by Pascal Sebah in 1874.



The church of St. Eleftherios. Photograph by Ernst Reisinger in 1923.

Although the location of Athens and the ancient democracy gradually lost its importance over the following centuries, the “material facts” of its myth remained in ruin form and eventually lead to its re-foundation: In 1834 Athens became capital of the newfound modern Greek state and a field of several architectural undertakings under Bavarian rule. This new city was certainly different from Rossi's Ancient Athens, but it elaborated on the same myth. Within this context, two neighboring buildings can serve as reverse “urban artifacts”, reaffirming (and hopefully extending) Rossi's analysis.

The Metropolitan Cathedral of Athens was planned by King Otto, Greece's first (Bavarian) monarch, as an attempt to appease the Christian Athenians. Otto's planners avoided placing it along the new monumental axis (Panepistimiou ave., which already included the city's University, Library and Academy) and opted instead for a site closer to the buzzing old core of the city. Construction began in 1842, but it took three architects, 20 years and materials from about 72 demolished buildings to complete it. Nevertheless, nothing in the building's neoclassical symmetry, uniform decoration and stucco exterior bears traces of its heterogeneous construction.

At the time, the European import of Neoclassicism was presented as the ultimate “local” style for Greece, as it “returned” to the place of its origin. In the case of

the Cathedral, this rhetoric refined its strategy of nation-building: Orthodox Christianity, for which Greeks fought hard against the Ottoman Turks, was housed in a building that related it to the reinstated glory of Ancient Greece, complemented with Byzantine detailing to blend the two. Its location and monumentality were indicative of an intentional urban artifact: It was designed as an indicator of form, style and scale for Athens and its reshaping in the nineteenth century.

Right next to this Cathedral there is a tiny church that displays a different use of the material remains of the same myth: The Church of St. Eleftherios was built in the 11th century AD (but allegedly refurbished several times afterwards). Although it follows the cross-in-square typology, its exterior is a rather peculiar composition: The church's outer walls are clad in marble pieces, many of which are “spolia” (re-used architectural parts) from Hellenistic and Classical monuments.

The buildings that surrounded this older church were destroyed to make space for the adjacent Cathedral and piazza. Nevertheless, its scale and form are testament to the logic that lead the formation of the city before the 19th century. Unlike its neighbour, this pre-modern construction is not a materialization of an image drawn on paper, i.e. a “design”. It is, instead, a result of circumstances and specificities: Decorative pieces from ancient mo-



Photographs by Nikos Magouliotis.

numents, often containing outdated imagery and symbolisms, were incorporated in its construction and often altered to create a highly complicated urban artifact. Many details of the exterior can serve as examples of this.

Above the main entrance stands a relief depicting a calendar of yearly customs of the ancient Athenian society. The builders of the church did not treat this relic with an attitude of archeological preservationism, but with one of additive vandalism that attempts to transform its theme: crosses were carved at specific points, displacing its semiotic towards the Christian and perhaps even claiming that what is depicted is a sequence of Orthodox, and not Pagan, customs.

Similarly, a plate on the north wall depicting a naked bearded man, possibly a satyr, is “Christianized” through creative alteration: the two nymphs that were probably dancing on each side of the central figure were replaced by two big crosses. His penis was also scraped off and there you have it: the satyr is now an ascetic hermit, perfectly fitting to the exterior of a Christian church.

Finally, above the southern entrance sits a marble piece containing symbols of the obscure Eleusinian rituals: a decorated bull's head (usually sacrificed in such ceremonies), a shield with torches and a vessel that allegedly contained the hallucinatory seeds consumed by the participants. Paradoxically, in this case no alteration was made. The pagan ritualistic symbols were simply placed on the exterior of a Christian church.

Perhaps the Athenians of the time had little knowledge of the obscurity contained in their ancient heritage. Perhaps much of what was re-used to decorate the temple was there simply because it looked pretty and required no effort apart from transportation to the site. In any case, for the layman, the context of the church was probably able to inspire different interpretations and make such heterogeneous pieces look fitting to this puzzle. Through such details, St. Eleftherios makes a peculiar twist of Rossi's thesis: by using material fragments of the myth of the city, this small artifact is able to transform the myth itself and deflect its potential meanings.

It is, then, perhaps not surprising that the small church is mentioned in Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown's legendary *Learning from Las Vegas*, in the chapter of “Historical and Other Precedents”. The church is and described as both a “decorated shed” and a “duck”, “decorated with an appliqué collage of objets trouvés – bas-reliefs in masonry – more or less explicitly symbolic in content”. This brief reference (complemented by a photograph of the church, next to images of the Amiens Cathedral and the “Golden Nugget” Casino in Las Vegas) is probably the book's only mention of a building in Greece. If compared to the Acropolis as the only Greek reference in Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture*, one could start a much wider discussion on both modern and post-modern “precedents”.

But before declaring St. Eleftherios a manifesto of “pre-modern post-modernism”, we ought to return to how it relates to its aforementioned neighbor: St. Eleftherios appears to be the result of architectural and constructional pragmatism, while the Athens Cathedral is a highly idealistic building. The two neighboring buildings are urban artifacts, but in very dissimilar ways: If the latter is an intentional, designed urban artifact, the former appears as a rather un-intended retaining of history through the recycling of the architectural and mythical matter of the city.

Nevertheless, underneath its “pragmatist” surface, St. Eleftherios hides a strong idealism: Unlike its neighbor, the church's nave is perfectly orientated to the east, in tune with the Christian ecclesiastic tradition. The Cathedral is slightly shifted from this orientation to align to the adjacent street – in this case it is the city and its axes that matters. On the other hand, St. Eleftherios, despite its humble scale claims a relation to the entire Christian cosmos.

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