Architects dwelling between politics, aesthetics, and resistance

Activism at Home

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Building Before Theorising Resistance: 118 Benaki Street beyond critical regionalism

Stylianos Giamarelos

The camera pans to capture, in 1978, the modern city of Athens as it covers the undulating landscape between the Philopappou and the Acropolis hills. It then zooms in to register specific moments in this seemingly endless urban mass, as four-to-six-storey apartment buildings (a typology known as the Athenian polykatoikia) succeed one another in invariable repetition. But as the camera moves closer to the foot of Strefi hill, it is suddenly attracted by a four-storey apartment building that differs from the rest. The viewpoint immediately shifts to the level of the street to inspect the main elevation of this unique piece of Athenian architecture on 118 Benaki Street. It then follows a young man who enters the building to visit the apartment on the first floor. He is the son of Suzana Antonakaki and Dimitris Antonakakis, the architectural couple who designed the building, and have lived and worked there since 1974. Tracing his visit to the apartment, the camera showcases its exceptional architectural features (Fig. 1). The eye behind it belongs to Alekos Polychroniadis, a fellow architect in Antonakakis’ collaborative practice, Atelier 66, which occupies the ground floor of the same building.

Resistant architecture

Summarising their ideas in a series of five sketches in the manner of Le Corbusier’s five points for a new architecture, Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis contrast the ‘conventional’ with ‘another strategy’ for the polykatoikia (Fig. 2). Framing the visit to the building in juxtaposition to the city around it, the film records the two Antonakakis critique of the standard Athenian apartment building typology and the generic post-war development of the Greek capital. The camera inspects the main elevation to allude to the unique spatial arrangement behind it. It clearly shows that this is not the facade of a standard Athenian apartment building, with the wet spaces and the stairwells at its dark core, the living rooms extending to the horizontal symmetrical balconies at the front and the bedrooms at the back (Fig. 3). There is no typical floor plan on 118 Benaki Street. Apparently sculpted rather than stacked on top of one another, most of the apartments span two floors. They can be clearly identified within the overall building structure even from the street level, as each of them has its own architectural identity. The camera returns to the visitor who enters the building. As he opens the door, he does not find himself in a luxurious lobby, but in a stone-paved courtyard. To get from the urban public space to the private sphere of the apartment on the first floor, he does not disappear into the building’s interior but traverses a series of successive enclosed and semi-enclosed thresholds. These also serve as occasions for seeing and meeting with the other tenants, as they circulate in and out of their apartments. As the visitor enters the
apartment, the camera moves to showcase the architects’ concern for cross-ventilation and natural light, and the gradient interplay of private, semi-public, and public spaces on different levels. When the visitor arrives at the heart of it, the apartment presents itself as a city within four walls, with similarly interlocking degrees of privacy and publicness. The double-height living room turns the apartment inside out. When Suzana Antonakaki leans out of her bedroom window, an internal window that gives on to the living room, this interior space echoes the outdoor piazza of a Greek island settlement within the four walls of a metropolitan apartment. This recourse to ‘tradition’ forms the resistant core of the Antonakakis architecture, which does not rely on mere formal replication but carries over the memory of spatial qualities of life in the open-air environment of the vernacular settlement. It is from this context that most Athenians originate anyway, following the unprecedented growth of the urban population in the early post-war decades.¹

Their work on 118 Benaki Street in the early 1970s enabled Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis to systematise their five-point critique to the Athenian apartment building typology in sketches and film later in the same decade. But as an essentially retrospective process, this narrowly defined architectural critique overlooks equally crucial ways in which the building resists and subverts existing design conventions, standard modes of production, and everyday practices of sharing a life within the same Athenian apartment building. It is the lived history of 118 Benaki Street, from the moment of its initial conception to the present, that foregrounds its agency as a resistant experiment of communal living in Athens. Revisiting this history unveils the multifarious, resilient, and dissipating aspects of resistance on 118 Benaki Street – from the dominant development model of the polykatoikia to communal life and its aesthetics. But it also highlights the tensions that gradually rise between the originally resistant intentions and their long-term implementation in practice over four decades.

**Resistant mode of production**

Post-war Athens was an essentially provincial capital that struggled to manage the massive influx of population from the rest of the country without the state funds to satisfy the rising demand in housing. In Greece, public housing represents less than three per cent of the total surface of residential space.² The production of new housing, therefore, seemed virtually impossible without the participation of the small-scale private sector, from landowners to contractors. To incentivise such partnerships, the Greek state eventually institutionalised the informal mechanism of the antiparochi, a quid-pro-quo agreement between landowners with limited budgets and contractors who did not own plots of land. Through antiparochi, the landowners got the best apartments they would not have been able to build themselves, while the contractors who constructed the buildings covered their expenses and profited from selling the remaining apartments to third parties. This ‘win-win’ mechanism proved especially effective for Greece’s small-scale housing market, serving as the motor of the construction boom from the 1950s onwards.
BLOCK OF APARTMENTS

NOT THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH – BUT ANOTHER STRATEGY

1

NOT The entrance or the building separating the street from the dwellings.

BUT The entrance acting as an intermediate space, which links the street and the dwellings.

2

NO Narrow, dark and repelling shared public spaces.

BUT Common spaces, which follow the entrance and are sunlit, inviting and open air.
NO  Disused outdoor space, which belongs to nobody, is used by nobody and is cared for by nobody.

BUT  Outdoor space containing a yard on the ground floor which is planted with trees and flowers, cared for and used by private owners.

NO  Spaces ventilated and lit only from one side with a dark intermediate zone of service spaces.

BUT  Spaces, which are transparent and ventilated from all sides, allowing nature to penetrate in and including light service spaces.

NO  Separated activities in order to receive guests
- Dwelling divided in two.
- Outdoor spaces which become corridors
- Underserved privacy.

BUT  Guests who participate in the activities.
- Spaces organized in small entities with larger grades of privacy.
- Outdoor spaces comfortable, protected and familiar, acting as an extension of the indoor spaces.
Fig. 3  Main elevation. Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, 118 Benaki Street apartment building, Athens, 1975. (© Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis private archive)
The other significant state intervention in the early post-war years appeared in 1955, when a new building code aimed to regulate the flourishing housing market through prohibitions and prescriptions. These ranged from the specified contours of new constructions (including the overall height, number of individual floors, window heights, setbacks, and penthouses) to architectural details (including the width and extensions of balconies and terraces). Contractors added their own layer of requirements to this typology. To maximise profit, they aimed for simple, standardised floors with the maximum possible number of rooms, impressive facades, and luxurious lobbies. To suit the needs of projected but unknown clients, their architects in turn had to ensure their designs were flexible enough. The standard apartment building typology of booming post-war Athens was effectively prescribed by these practices and the new building code. But the indiscriminate repetition of this same building type across the Athenian basin created an urban environment that was deemed faceless by the 1970s.

It is this commodifying mode of production of the small-scale construction sector that Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis opposed. Resisting the quantitative urges of the developers, they not only promoted the qualitative aspects of their architecture, but they also attempted to give a wider meaning to the notion of state-supported ‘participation’ of the small-scale private sector in the 1950s that went beyond its exclusive interpretation in economic terms. The two Antonakakis aimed to nurture unmediated and personified relations with the future residents of their project. These ties spanned from the design to the construction process and the subsequent sharing of a communal life within the building. In so doing, the two architects also explored the alternative possibilities for agreements between interested parties that remained latent in the legal mechanism of the antiparochi.

118 Benaki Street is indeed the product of a collaborative process that subverted the established hierarchies in the design, construction, and use of space in the standard Athenian apartment. Each of the four families involved contributed what was necessary for the realisation of the communal project: land, labour, and capital. The land was offered by the Dolkas and Kannas families. The labour was shared in accordance with each party’s professional expertise (the two architects, Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, designed the building; the lawyer, Pattie Dolka, established the tenants’ unmediated partnership through antiparochi; the mechanical engineer, Lampis Dolkas, devised the central ventilation and heating system). The remaining capital was offered by the Nezis (and later by the wider Antonakakis family when they stepped in to buy the ground floor and use it as the main office space of Atelier 66). Starting their own one-off partnership with the other families to erect this building enabled the architects to keep their safe distance from the dictates of the Greek construction sector of the period. It was this move that enabled them to prioritise the architectural qualities they valued, and put them into practice in their complex building typology.
Each apartment of 118 Benaki Street is a bespoke piece of architecture. From the phase of the first sketches, the architects established a feedback loop with the future residents. The Antonakakis shared their initial architectural proposals, the tenants suggested modifications that led to a revised proposal by the architects, and so on, for about a year. The architects knew and shared friendly bonds with all the parties involved in the project. When I interviewed them in 2014, the other residents of the building emphasised its conception as an experiment in collaborative living. They referred to it as ‘a four-storey single-family house’, while children from different families described ‘growing up like sisters’ in the building. They also described collective cooking sessions in kitchens on different floors, sharing meals with the other families, how the doors of their apartments usually remained unlocked, enabling their children to go up and down the stairs at will (Fig. 4). These and other instances of their shared life across the building’s four stories further reinforced the resistant aspects of communal living on 118 Benaki Street.

Knowing the future tenants to design residential spaces that would fit their specific needs was the two Antonakakis’ personified response to the ‘anonymous’ generic approach of the Greek contractors. 118 Benaki Street is the product of a household economy. In the absence of intermediaries, the tenants’ partnership ensured that the design decisions were affected only by those who intended to share their lives in this building. These social bonds were crucial for the completion of the project. It was only through the connective tissue of social relations that this more ‘traditionally’ collective way of life could be retained and developed in the transition from the agrarian to the metropolitan condition of atomised anonymity. These embedded social relations that were also transposed to the mode of production of the building formed the second significant layer in the Antonakakis holistic conception of ‘tradition’. In addition to the spatial typologies that condense the insights of a long-standing relation of dwelling in the region, for the Antonakakis ‘tradition’ also signalled a specific aesthetic language as its significant third element. It is only when one considers these three registers (spatial typologies, social bonds, aesthetics) together that the resistant core of the Antonakakis architecture is fully revealed.

Resistant aesthetics

If the recourse to tradition in the anonymous context of a modern metropolis was to be fully realised, the residents would also have to ascribe to the architects’ modernised ‘traditional’ aesthetic language. If a tenant did not share this mentality, an architectural project like this could not work. The residents of 118 Benaki Street were conscious of their decisions. They knew they were living in an unconventional apartment building. They therefore felt they also had to follow the architects’ taste in the interior spaces, to avoid an aesthetic dissonance with the Antonakakis’s overarching vision. In the residents’ eyes, the final word on the overall aesthetics could only belong to the expert architect.
Fig. 4  New Year’s dinner in Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis apartment with Atelier 66 architects and Benaki Street tenants, 1991. (@ Lucy Tzefou-Triantafylou’s private archive)

Fig. 5  First-floor apartment, living room. Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, 118 Benaki Street apartment building, Athens, 1975. (© Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis private archive)
But it was not long before the architects noted discrepancies between theirs and the other residents’ aesthetic preferences. Tenants did not want their apartments as simple and austere as Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis had originally designed them with their limited collective budget in the early 1970s. Aesthetic considerations aside, tenants had to settle for the most economic options available at the time: roughcast plaster for the walls and Sifnos stones for the floors. Despite their initial fascination with these materials as reminiscent of Greek island life, in the late 1990s and early 2000s the other residents of 118 Benaki Street replaced the Sifnos stones on the floor of their apartments with marble or timber. For some tenants, this was also a case of following the style of the times.7 Constructed in the early 1970s, the aesthetic language of the interiors was aligned with the wider turn to Greek folk art of the time. The carpets, rugs, and other small objects that originally covered the floors or decorated the apartments were meant as a cultural expression of this return to folk culture (Fig. 5). They represented an authenticity that resisted the superficial recuperation and kitsch abuse of Greek ‘tradition’ by the authoritarian military regime of the period (1967–74). This was especially the case for Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis and their collaborative architectural practice, Atelier 66. From their non-hierarchical ways of collaboration to the ways they designed architectural interiors or dressed themselves, their holistic revisit of tradition aimed to re-
gain it as an active cultural agent in the present (Fig. 6). In so doing, it also signalled a political act of resistance to the junta.

**Residual Hierarchies**

However, the actual life of the residents in the building proved that the architects’ original intentions were short-lived. These increasingly sounded like the dying echo of a provincial tradition that could not survive the advance of the Athenian metropolis and the individualist urban lifestyle. The unconventional aspects of the tenants’ shared life gradually faded. When the four families started locking their doors, and central heating was autonomously managed by each individual apartment because of their differing needs during the day, life on 118 Benaki Street increasingly resembled that of the typical Athenian apartment building in the early 1990s. Today each storey functions in isolation from the others, and the interiors of the other tenants’ apartments have all been modified. The two architects were sceptical about the refurbishments instigated by the tenants. In a newspaper article they published in 2000, they refer to these decisions as ‘irrelevant to the intentions that were once regarded as preconditions’. Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis could not bear losing control of their work after its completion. They were reluctant to entrust it unconditionally to the life and preferences of its residents. This in turn meant that the superior position of the architects in the design hierarchy was not practically subverted.

This was also the case for their collaboration with other professionals in the construction industry. The architects constantly remained at the helm of the design process. For them, collaboration practically meant getting the craftsmen to understand the architects’ intentions and the overarching rationale of their designs. These went beyond the standardised solutions of banal apartment buildings. They therefore challenged the skills of their craftsmen. The design philosophy of the Antonakakis posited that this inability to standardise the design details of their work preserved a crucial architectural quality from being lost. In an era of industrial standardisation, it harked back to the subtle qualities of ‘traditional’ human craft and manual work. The architects had developed their own good sense of the use, qualities, and properties of various materials. They prepared drawings and models specifically for their craftsmen. Through these drawings and models, they instructed them. They laid out the full details needed for construction. For the structural design of their buildings, the civil engineers also had to retain the Antonakakis architectural intentions intact. They thus engaged with the architectural brief, to solve the problems that arose from the architects’ design intentions. Again, the engineers started working on these details from a preliminary version of the structural design provided by the architects. This draft structure was already aligned with key design elements and architectural intentions. Despite the Antonakakis repeated rhetoric of creative contribution of the parties involved, the architects’ superior role in the design hierarchy was not practically challenged on this front either.
Finally, Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis non-standard approach to the apartment building did not go unobserved by the Greek contractors of the period. Some of them charged the Antonakakis with elitism. When Suzana Antonakaki reused and further developed some of the Benaki project features in the subsequent Doxapatri apartment building in the late 1970s, the future tenants of this building also formed a similar partnership, but they found it more difficult to cooperate as they did not share the friendly ties of the parties involved in the Benaki Street cooperative. Generalising a design process that rested on personified interaction with the involved parties proved inherently difficult.

Ioanna Theocharopoulou’s recent work on the construction of modern Athens adds nuance to this bigger picture. From builders to housewives, her historical account of the post-war apartment building traces the rise of an aberrant way of making that is specifically Athenian. This does not only contextualise Antonakakis work. It also suggests the substitution of their agrarian-inspired conception of ‘tradition’ with its urban equivalent by the 1980s. And this might in turn be another reason why the architects’ original resistant intentions proved short-lived and many of the ‘traditional’ aspects of their work soon dissipated.

Today’s architectures of resistance might therefore need to follow different genealogies of their own that address this concrete Athenian condition and its gradual formation in the late twentieth century. It is only through this sort of nuanced historical engagement that politics can be significantly retained at the heart of architectures and discourses of resistance today.

Retheorising resistance

Tensions that are only revealed when one turns to the lived history of the building over four decades challenge the standard ways in which this project has been appropriated to theorise architectural resistance by critical regionalism and other related discourses. As they bypass the nuanced history of this resistant project, theoretical appropriations like Kenneth Frampton’s offer only a frozen idealised image of architectural resistance. This cannot be informative for resistant practices today. It is only a return to the fullness of the original historical image, to the social world as the architects wanted to see it transformed alongside the contingent fate of their actions, that helps foreground the political core of these resistant architectures and discourses for the present.

The history of an exemplary signifier of architectural resistance like 118 Benaki Street shows how the resistant aspects of the project have also been interpreted differently from its historically variable audiences. These are not limited to the idealising critics, but also include unconvincing residents and deriding contractors. The architects’ original intentions foreground the centrality of challenging specific modes of production to establish novel forms of collaborative living. But the short lifespan of these intentions in their practi-
cal implementation also highlights the contradictions involved in architectural pursuits that attempt to orchestrate unconventional ways of living. Their historical fate is more emphatically informative if one wishes to go the extra mile to envision these changes on a broader scale. Especially the Greek contractors' reactions to the architects' intentions show how an architecture of resistance can also be received as its exact opposite, a generator of elite circles of the happy few and their indulgent idealisations. In other cases, problems might emerge from residual hierarchies and operative modes that remain unchallenged or resist change.

Whenever an apartment building like 118 Benaki Street is posited as a microcosm of an envisioned social change at a larger scale, the temptation to enter into another circle of idealised discourse is also present. In significant respects, the concrete experiment of 118 Benaki Street echoes Gerald A. Cohen's thought experiment of the camping trip that explores how desirable, feasible, and difficult it would prove to expand the principles of equity and community from a group of friends to a wider societal scale. Since projects like 118 Benaki Street still form part of legacies and genealogies of more recent attempts to rethink the city of Athens as an urban common, the challenge lies in resisting to turn these exemplars into supposedly self-evident images, but engage with the full spectrum of their historical contingency.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, Alekos Athanassiadis, Pattie Dolka, Myrto Nezi, and Yannis Roussos for agreeing to be interviewed for this project, and the Bartlett School of Architecture Research Fund for supporting it.

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