



Remote Traces

Reshaping Athens in Search of the Ancient Landscape of the Agora

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Abstract. This paper reflects on what we are willing to sacrifice in a city in order to bring to light traces of its archaic past. The desire to rediscover an ancient world and preserve its memory necessarily entails making room in the present, at times erasing what exists in order to overwrite it. Across different contexts, the design of archaeological landscapes must confront recurring polarities: memory/amnesia, covered/uncovered, remoteness/closeness.

The case of the Athenian Agora is emblematic. The excavation campaign conducted by the American School from the 1930s onwards did not merely uncover the ancient marketplace of the classical city, but initiated a profound reconfiguration of the urban fabric. Drawing on recent studies and archival research, the article reconstructs the evolution of this fragment of the city, reshaped according to specific aesthetic canons and historically determined values. From the complete demolition of the dense Vrysaki neighborhood to the historical layers brought to light by the excavations, the paper examines the image of what was intended to become the city's first public archaeological park. The Agora project also inspired subsequent interventions aimed at unifying the archaeological area and creating a contemporary "promenade architecturale."

The conclusion raises a question by imagining the repetition, in the present day at the Academy of Plato, of the same process carried out in the past for the Agora. This question also suggests a reinterpretation of the role of the archaeological park in the contemporary city, in light of the challenges and crises of our time.



Figure 1. Excavation of the Agora, statue of Hadrian and Temple of Hephaestus, 1930 (American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Archives, Homer A. Thompson Photographic Collection - Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens, © Hellenic Ministry of Culture / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development).

MEMORY/AMNESIA

Archaeological Excavations as Symbolic Alteration of the City

«Apparently man cannot create without destroying simultaneously»

Aalto, 1955.

Archaeology, in the philosophical sense proposed by Michel Foucault (1969), originates from the desire to establish order among things. This classification is produced through a gaze that simultaneously reveals and excludes, in order to uncover connections among elements. Archaeological activity is conceived as a naked experience of order. Similarly, historical science (Bloch, 1972), which investigates the relationships among facts, tends to reveal relationships between objects, giving meaning to inert traces of the past in the absence of their original context. The act of excavation, however, is far from neutral. It is well known (Papageorgiou-Venetas, 1999) that the first urban transformations of modern Athens are inseparable from the archaeological campaigns initiated after 1834 – the year in which the city became the capital of the independent Greek state – in order to rediscover its classical form. The aim here is not to revisit these topics due to some anniversary – although this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Stoa of Attalos reconstruction in the Athenian Agora – nor because of a particular event, as occurred for example in the early 1990s. At that time, Athens, as the first European Capital of Culture (1985), returned to the idea of a unified archaeological park by launching an international competition for the Acropolis Museum. Rather, the need to reflect on interventions in urban archaeological areas arises from an intrinsic characteristic of architectural theory, recently overshadowed. Manfredo Tafuri attributes a weak power to historical-critical analysis (1992). If analysis, as remembrance and anamnesis, is not capable of resolving the problems of the past, it nevertheless has the duty to unsettle the present. Renewing an investigation into the urban morphology of the archaeological center of Athens is therefore closely linked to reflections on the present condition of the contemporary city. On several occasions, archaeology as a modern discipline (Bandinelli, 1976) has been considered legitimate to erase entire parts of a city in order to unearth the ancient remains, in the name of ideological and economic reasons rooted in the supremacy of nation-states. At other times, as in the emblematic case of Haussmannian Paris, the search for a new order in the urban organism was implemented through the dismantling of older parts of the city in order to make room for the modern. Conversely, often in exceptional circumstances – such as under totalitarian regimes or in wartime – the overturning of the relationship between ancient and modern takes place through a blind destruction of the present, as a form of “spaciocide” (Weizman, 2022) or a tabula rasa, where absolute order removes any possibility for memory and history. In the urban history of Athens, these three perspectives seem to coexist. The city is profoundly reshaped both in the name of modernity and in order to reconnect with the glorious era of Hellenic civilization, as well as to erase a more recent painful past of Turkish occupation. Every attempt to reshape the morphological structure of the city expresses the need to reinterpret its symbolic value: the image is transformed in order to substantially redefine the urban identity of which it is the simulacrum.

The Relationship between Present and Past at the Beginning of Urban Archaeology

«Death, which spares no living being, also strikes the works of man. Among the testimonies of the past one must know how to recognize and distinguish those that are still truly vital. Not everything that is past has, by that very fact, a right to eternity; and it is wise to choose carefully what must be respected» (Le Corbusier, 1960, 66). This thesis is formulated in the Athens Charter of 1933 and enhances the criteria by which, in the early twentieth century, entire portions of cities were removed in order to undertake some of the most significant archaeological excavations ever conducted. In the Mediterranean basin, Rome and Athens are paradigmatic cases of this approach:



Figure 2. Athens model, 1842 - north view. From: Travlos, 1981 (Athens City Museum Vouros - Eutaxias Foundation).

by privileging a radiant past, other historical periods, perceived as irrelevant or even inconvenient, have been sacrificed. In both cities – deeply unprepared to become modern capitals – archaeology plays a crucial political role. Large portions of the existing urban fabric are removed in order to profoundly restructure local and national identity as well as the international urban image. Imperial Rome supplants the city of the Popes in order to legitimize the rhetoric of the Fascist regime, while classical Hellenic Athens dismantles the Ottoman city of mosques to found the newly independent Greek state.

In the case of Rome, during Fascism the demolitions – often carried out without systematic documentation and outside the provisions of the 1909 master plan then in force – radically transformed the previously defined archaeological area and superseded earlier proposals for the “Archaeological Walk” and the “Monumental Zone” (Insolera and Perego, 1983). «Did archaeological studies really require such a great sacrifice?» asked Italo Insolera in his *Roma moderna* (1962). The regime used archaeology to construct the myth of an eternal Rome and Caput Mundi, bringing to light the monumental basin enclosed by the hills, which late imperial Rome had allowed to sink into oblivion together with its pagan identity (Manieri Elia, 1998). Once the houses had been demolished, a desert-like void was created around the monuments and, without concern for the original unity of the area, the environment of the Fora was cut in two.

Using Rome as a comparison with the Athenian case highlights how archaeology was employed in both contexts as a powerful symbolic device, capable of altering urban spatiality in order to access a remote historical past useful for redefining the collective imagery of cities. At the same

time, this comparison reveals a significant difference between the two cities regarding the role of design. In the case of the Roman Fora – as well as, for example, the Roman amphitheatre in Piazza Sant'Oronzo in Lecce (Manieri Elia, 1998) and the archaeological site of Herculaneum in the town of Resina – demolitions isolated the ancient remains in order to fence them off and juxtapose them with the modern city as objects of contemplation, a superior and unreachable horizon. Conversely, in Athens a topographical landscape strategy was adopted, based on the awareness that every urban intervention on an archaeological site is also an archaeological project and that every excavation campaign is likewise an urban project (Tsiomis, 2002). The design of archaeological areas is a matter of designing the form to be given to a more or less remote past of urban history. Excavation is a topographical and topological gesture that destabilizes an established settlement order; it opens a wound, a traumatic event in the organism of the city that requires, through design, the redefinition of urban identity.

COVER/UNCOVERED

Athens as Capital and the Re-creation of the Ancient Landscape

A modest and wretched landscape, deeply marked by Turkish domination, destruction, and looting, had overwritten the mythical and glorious place where democracy was born. Athens, a village of about 4,000 inhabitants «covered with dust and mud» (Papageorgiou, 2011, 123), was chosen as the capital because it was ideally associated in the learned imagination of the time with the aura of its classical period. After 1834 the desolate village grew visibly and, thanks to the new urban design, a composite identity took shape in which different urban morphologies coexisted. On the one hand stood the picturesque fabric of the Ottoman city, composed of narrow and winding streets, Turkish houses, mosques, and Byzantine churches. On the other hand stood the new layout introduced by contemporary urban plans, inspired by the spatial order and proportions of the great European capitals. Neoclassical architecture became the style chosen by the government – under the Bavarian regency after the War of Independence – to give form to the capital of the neo-Greek society. The invention of the ancient landscape was the main theme around which the first urban plan of Athens (1833) was structured, just before the city was proclaimed capital. Stamatis Kleanthis and Edward Schaubert – pupils of Karl Friedrich Schinkel – directed urban development northward and envisioned an extensive archaeological area around the Acropolis, imagining the city being brought back to its classical Hellenic past through future excavation campaigns. Within the boundaries of this pioneering archaeological park, the two architects intended to leave the zone completely uninhabited in order to rediscover the city of Theseus and Hadrian (Travlos, 1981). Unpopular, extensive and costly expropriations, without the guarantee of alternative housing for residents, were the main reason for the revision of this plan in 1834 by architect Leo von Klenze. Meanwhile, Athens was rapidly changing: the Turkish walls were demolished, the new government settled in, the city began to expand, and the population grew. Consequently, part of the archaeological area at the foot of the Acropolis – as originally envisioned by Kleanthis and Schaubert – was sacrificed for new housing. Despite the strong pressures from urbanization, and with the support of the Archaeological Society of Athens founded in 1837, occasional excavation operations were launched to rediscover monuments of classical antiquity. In fact, in the following decades the expropriations expected in the archaeological zone were not implemented. During the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, attention focused instead on targeted beautification interventions and on modernizing infrastructure, including extending the railway line connecting Athens with Piraeus. A systematic process aimed at rediscovering the classical Agora began only in the 1920s, when, after the end of the First World War, it was decided to protect the area from new waves of urbanization by defining the boundaries of the archaeological area to be expro-

priated. Recognizing that it could not finance the project alone, the Greek government involved foreign archaeological schools (Capps, 1933). The American School of Classical Studies at Athens (ASCSA) recognized the importance of the enterprise and, despite the economic crisis of 1929, committed itself to raising funds to support the research of the ancient Athenian Agora, involving institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation.

A Neighborhood Disappears from the Athens Map: the Urban Project and the Role of the American School

A special law (No. 4212), whose drafting also involved representatives of the ASCSA (Capps, 1933), was enacted in 1929 to regulate the conduct of the excavations. After almost a century, the plan envisioned by Kleanthis and Schaubert – though reduced and scaled down – finally took shape. The archaeological area on the northern slopes of the Acropolis was divided into two parts: one to the west, toward what is now recognized as the Temple of Hephaestus, was entrusted to the ASCSA; the other, to the east, toward Hadrian's Library, remained under the responsibility of the Archaeological Society of Athens. John Travlos, architect of the excavation campaign, counts the American undertaking among the most significant scientific events of the twentieth century, considering it the first systematic and extensive excavation conducted in the city (1981).

Expropriations were announced in January 1931; by May of the same year, the houses in the sector assigned to the American campaign had already been demolished and investigations had begun. In the first report, the director of the excavations at the time, T. Leslie Shear, noted that «The entire area of the Agora covers about twenty-six acres of land on which are built six hundred houses with between 6,000 and 7,000 inhabitants» (1933). More specifically, Shear explained, the area assigned to the Americans «includes about sixteen acres of land situated between the Kolonos Agoraios on the west and the east side of the Stoa of Attalus ... In this area 367 houses and parcels of land are located and the immediate aim of the first campaign was the discovery, beneath these streets and houses teeming with modern life, of some conspicuous landmark of the ancient city which would serve as a point of departure for future exploitation of the site» (Ibidem). The history of these expropriations and demolitions of houses, churches, shops, and streets – which erased an entire neighborhood – is carefully illustrated in a recent study. The research conducted by Sylvie Dumont (2020) reconstructs an urban memory of Athens, that is essential for understanding the complexity of its urban palimpsest. Until 1931 the only identified monument was the Stoa of Attalos. The exact location of the Athenian Agora remained unknown, as it was largely still buried beneath the dense modern neighborhood known by the toponyms of Vrysaki or Vlassorou, recorded by the Greek archaeologist Kyriakos Pittakis in 1835 (Dumont, 2020). The area, inhabited mainly by the working class, was widely considered unhealthy. The picturesque neighborhood of Vrysaki gradually disappeared from the map of Athens; between 1931 and 1939 – the year in which excavations were suspended because of the war – most houses were demolished, while the resident population was relocated elsewhere. Sector by sector, the demolitions were documented through photographs taken by members of the excavation team, enabling Dumont to reconstruct a detailed urban image of this neighborhood and its inhabitants. On the 348 irregular plots officially identified stood 625 houses, low buildings – no more than two stories high – organized around a traditional courtyard typology, in a wide variety of forms. The quality of the houses, built with modest materials – local stone, lime, and wood – and occasionally featuring simple neoclassical decorations and typical antefixes, was considered not only modest but poor and of no particular value. Over time the neighborhood had accommodated informal dwellings built by refugees during several waves of migration, one of the largest following the Catastrophe of Smyrna in 1922. The disappearance of Vrysaki, rather than being regarded as a loss, was almost perceived as an improvement by administrators and archaeologists.



Figure 3. Griswold R. E., Agora Landscape Plan, updated Aug. 1955 (American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations).

The enactment of Law 4212/1929 therefore marks a decisive turning point in Athenian urban archaeology. It did not merely served a regulatory function but became the vehicle for an urban vision rooted in neoclassical culture and in the ideology of nineteenth-century nation-states, which would prove decisive in shaping the urban morphology of contemporary Athens. At the same time, this pioneering law anticipated the need for a ground design for the archaeological area of the classical Agora, enabling the reconstruction of ancient topography, while also guiding the development of the surrounding urban fabric. The legislative text required the ASCSA not only to conduct the excavation campaign in the assigned area but also to transform the site into an archaeological park, initially conceived to be open to public use. The intention to create a landscape project for the site, formalized in the law and developed through the work of the ASCSA, can rightly be considered innovative for its time: in Rome, during those same years, enlightened interventions were carried out thanks to prominent figures such as Giacomo Boni and Raffaele De Vico; however, these were unable to achieve the resonance of an urban project or the evocative power of a philological approach to the ancient context as a whole. The excavations, suspended between 1939 and 1945 during the Second World War, were resumed and continued until 1953, when the reconstruction of the Stoa of Attalos was initiated and the landscape design of the area was defined. Homer Thompson, director of the excavations from 1946, in one of the reports¹ documenting the progress of the work, offered an effective comparison between the urban landscape that a visitor would have seen on the northern slopes of the Acropolis in 1931 with the space that would have been perceived in 1950, when investigations had almost revealed the original layout of the classical Agora: a «closely built district of shabby 19th century houses», «the principal slum area in the middle of a modern city of 800,000 inhabitants», where «despite an infinite amount of scholarly speculation virtually complete ignorance prevailed», had given way



Figure 4. Initial demolitions in the northern area of the Agora excavations. From: Schear, 1933 (American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations).

to the ancient square, with the visible footprint of the principal civic, commercial, and sacred buildings defining its sides. After the demolition of the modern houses, the area had been unearthed: the removed soil layer – on average about three meters deep, reaching a maximum of around twelve meters – was preserved where possible to support the future landscape arrangement of the site.

REMOTENESS/CLOSENESS

Agora as Landscaping Project

The classical Athens, erased by centuries of foreign occupation, is a relatively recent invention intended to remove the Byzantine and Ottoman past by overwriting urban morphology linked to centuries of domination. When Roland Barthes visited the city at the end of the 1930s, he said he was struck by the dissonance between the powerful fascination of certain ruins and the poverty of the modern settlement (Kourelis, 2020). The Hellenic image of Athens did not exist until about a century ago and was conceived within the framework of a European taste that was at once neoclassical, romantic, and philhellenic, which proved decisive for the city's nomination as the new capital of the Greek state. The excavation work and the subsequent landscape project of the Greek Agora, both conducted by the American School between the 1930s and the 1960s, produced an extremely significant component of this new urban image.

The landscape project intended to open the ancient Athenian marketplace to public use was entrusted to the Pittsburgh architect Ralph E. Griswold, upon the recommendation of Homer A.

Thompson, then director of the excavations of the American School. To understand the design of the area, reference is mainly made (Mauzy, 2006; Matteini and Ugolini, 2023) to a technical-descriptive report known as the Preliminary Report, dated October 15, 1953, discussed by Griswold himself in two articles (1954; 1957). These descriptions clarify the criteria, choices, and objectives of the landscape intervention. The two guiding principles are explicitly stated by the American architect and were defined in collaboration with the team of archaeologists. First, the intention not to compete with the ancient structures: every intervention was conceived in order to enhance the readability of the remains and the comprehensibility of the site. Vegetation was used to emphasize the ruins without overpowering them and to make the traces of ancient routes – such as the Panathenaic Way – more recognizable. The second criterion seeks to reconstruct an ancient landscape as authentically and autochthonously as possible, through the careful selection of tree and shrub species based on knowledge of ancient botany and limited to Mediterranean species and the wild flora of Attica (Papageorgiou-Venetas, 1994).

The American landscape architect Griswold was chosen because of his familiarity with the Mediterranean context; yet he himself acknowledged the limits of an experience largely developed during his stay at the American Academy in Rome (Rome Prize Fellow in 1920 and Resident Landscape Architect in 1950) and during the design of the Anzio military cemetery, developed from the late 1940s. Interaction with archaeologist colleagues – among them Richard E. Wycherley and Dorothy Burr Thompson – proved fundamental in defining both the overall layout of the new plantings and the selection of individual species. Particularly fruitful was the collaboration with the young American archaeologist – the first woman member of the Agora excavations and present since the first campaigns of the 1930s – whose discoveries enabled Griswold to restore the ancient garden of the Temple of Hephaestus, once surrounded by rows of myrtles and pomegranates contained in terracotta pots (Burr Thompson, 1937).

The project took shape not only through the intellectual contribution of English colleagues but also through constant dialogue with Greek technicians and experts, including, for example, the excavation architect John Travlos – an indefatigable draftsman who contributed not only to documentation but also to the design of the site – and Professor Basileios Krimbas of the Higher School of Agriculture, particularly for soil analyses and agronomic expertise. This inclusive process of dialogue and exchange, conducted by Griswold in parallel with architectural design, gave the intervention a broad interdisciplinary cultural matrix.

In order to realize the archaeological park required by Law 4212, the American School – consistent with the decision to reconstruct the building of the Stoa of Attalos as a museum – committed itself to recreating the appearance of the ancient landscape. The strategy of restoration, although sharply criticized by the dominant principles of urban planning and conservation culture of the time, achieved a surprisingly positive outcome for the overall landscape of the Athenian archaeological zone and its use. This was possible because the invention of the ancient landscape was above all a ground project (Secchi, 1986), attentive to the specificities of ancient topography and capable of giving meaning to the remains of the past within a unified context through the use of elementary materials such as soil, water, and vegetation. Specifically, the irrigation system integrated the reuse of ancient channels, wells, and cisterns discovered during the excavations with the installation of new components necessary to guarantee the water supply of the area, particularly arid despite once close to the watercourses of the Ilissos and the Eridanos. The planting of botanical species – made possible by the new irrigation system and careful soil treatment – was carried out in a participatory manner involving citizens and institutions (Griswold, 1957), encouraging the construction of a new sense of proximity and belonging toward a rediscovered place of the ancient city.

For a contemporary “Promenade Architecturale”

The project to reconfigure the ancient classical landscape of the Agora was supported not only by a state legislative framework but also by a far-sighted urban vision. Positioned in continuity with the plan of Kleanthes and Schaubert (1833) and with other unrealized proposals for a unified archaeological park (Mawson Plan, 1919; Biris Plan, 1949) – which interpreted the ancient city as a garden – this vision found an important advocate in Constantine Biris, then responsible for the planning sector within the municipality of Athens (Papageorgiou-Venetas, 1994). The architectural design of the landscape, directed by the American Ralph E. Griswold, constitutes a paradigmatic example of intervention in urban archaeological contexts and was pioneering for its time. Moreover, it initiated a broader process of transformation of the urban morphology whose effects resonated over the long term, inspiring further projects: from the better-known intervention by Dimitris Pikionis for the slopes of the Acropolis and the hill of Philopappos (1954-1958), to the unification of the Athenian archaeological sites implemented from the late 1990s, also in view of the 2004 Olympic Games (Tsiomis, 2002). Overall, the reconfiguration of the vegetated landscape of the Agora can be interpreted as the first conscious and targeted intervention aimed at continuing, and updating, a conservation practice that had existed in Athens since the early twentieth century, capable of overcoming a traditional constraint-based approach to protection. This original and forward-looking conservation strategy safeguarded the historic center of Athens, particularly its hills, through targeted afforestation interventions designed to counter both urban expansion and landscape destruction caused by intense extractive activities. With the aim of being preserved, the arid and barren orography of the Athenian archaeological zone was gradually transformed: on the one hand through reforestation, and on the other through the design of a slow, pedestrian accessibility intended not only for tourism but also for everyday routes to be practiced in daily life. By avoiding the complete submission of the city's cultural and symbolic capital to a consumerist destiny, this urban policy of protection found in the Agora a fertile starting point. Inspiring subsequent arrangements of Athenian archaeological sites as well, the project of the archaeological ground was conceived in an innovative way to guarantee a right to the city and to the landscape – beginning with the design of a topographical continuity between ancient and modern – going beyond objectives of purely aesthetic qualification of the site.

The urban archaeological project conducted in the Agora enabled the rediscovery of an Apollonian landscape, complementary to the vernacular Greek physiognomy of villages, monasteries, and islands (Simeoforidis, 1998), while at the same time profoundly different from the isotropic and hygienist space proposed by the Athens Charter of 1933 (Corboz, 1998). The Athenian promenade reinterprets the Corbusian promenade and, by employing landscape design as an urban device, does not subordinate open space to ruins, nor does it seek a separation between interior and exterior. Rather, by establishing continuities between surfaces and volumes, it endows the archaeological city with a public territorial matrix.

Instead of a conclusion:

What would happen if we applied the same process today to Plato's Academy?

Notes

¹ ASCSA, Homer E. Thompson Paper, Series V.

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Figure 5. The Panathenaic Way, Agora – View toward the Acropolis (Photo by Enrica Giaccaglia, 2024).