

# Architecture as Memory

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Buildings provide continuity – from the past into the future. They generate personal memory; they generate collective memory as well. Architecture addresses the past and the future simultaneously, through its embodiment of three possible sources of memory: the memory future users have of buildings they have experienced in the past; the experiential memory architects have of buildings encountered during their life; and the codified memory of earlier buildings transmitted through architectural education or apprenticeship, as rules, theories, or descriptions of architecture.

An example of “Architecture as Memory” is provided by two buildings which stand side by side in Maroussi, a suburban neighborhood in Athens, Greece. The two buildings, one built in 1922, and one in 1989 are closely related. The 1922 house was renovated by architect Yiannis Counelis, the grandson of the original owner. Yiannis Counelis also designed the 1989 house.

The older building (figure 1) was designed by architect Armodios Cartessios, in a style that has been referred to as “Mediterranean Gingerbread.” It was built for Counelis’ grandfather, a captain in the merchant marine. This style of architecture flourished in North African cities such as Alexandria, and South European ports such as Marseille, in the early part of the twentieth century. Since 1922, the original exterior has been defaced through successive “improvements,” which included the removal of all



Figure 1: Counelis' Grandfather's Home



Figure 2: Ornamental Sunscreen

exterior decorations. In 1978 the house was painted gray. In 1985 Counelis restored the exterior. The interior with a central hall, asymmetrical room arrangement and extremely high ceilings, was left intact.

The architect had very little to go by in restoring the house to its former splendor. A 2" x 3" black and white photograph and verbal accounts were of minimal value in restoring wood decorations of the porch which had originally given the exterior of the building much of its character. Lacking substantial information, the architect had a creative opportunity to recreate the wooden ornamentation which screened the porch from the intense sun (figure 2).

Choosing an exterior color posed a second design problem. Wanting to use a color that has been previously used on the house, the architect consulted with members of the family but found they had strongly conflicting memories. Scratching through the paint revealed seven or eight different color layers. The architect used the wall's memory “arbitrarily.” He chose two of those earlier colors, one a flesh tone pink for the wall, and the other a deep terracotta for the decorations and the window trim.

The recently built structure on the adjacent side is a duplex (figure 3) built for a son and a grandson who inherited land rather than the family home. The house for the son was designed as a summer home and built on a minimal budget, while the grandson's house was design-

ed as his principle residence.

In building this duplex, great value was placed on expressing its relationship to the family home, a house full of memories for the owners of the duplex. At the same time, there was also concern to design the duplex as a building reflecting the present era. The new building was built for families very different from the family of 1922. Contemporary Greek families are less strongly patriarchal than in the past and the sharp division of labor has been modified. Now men and women both work outside the home and share responsibility for the house upkeep and for raising children. Children are no longer viewed as imperfect grown ups, but as having their own childhood world.

These changes in family structure are reflected in the new building's organization of both plan and section, the relationship between interior and exterior spaces, and the facades. However, some common themes do provide a strong sense of continuity and relationship between the old and the new houses, especially on the facades.

The North (front) (figure 3) and West (facing the older house) facades of the new building resemble the older house in the same way that a child resembles its parents, that is similar, with some features

strikingly so, but at the same time distinctly different. A number of intentional references to the older house are part of the new house. The two buildings are similar in their overall massing, in the proportion of the overall height to width, in the hip tile roof, in the use of color in the facades, and the masonry wall with punched openings.



Figure 4: Northwest Corner of Duplex

The articulation of the window frames (figure 4) of the two new houses is an exact replication of those of the older building. The doors of the new building (figure 5) are recycled doors taken from buildings of the same vintage as the old house. They were chosen for their similarity to the door of the ancestral home. The grandson's house has a round sign with his wife's name, KATARINA, (figure 6) which mimics the round sign



Figure 3: North Elevation of Duplex

with the name ANGELA (the captain's wife) on the front facade of the older house (figure 1). Used shutters were hung on the summer house, not because they are identical to those of the old house, but to minimize cost. However, it was possible to put used shutters on the modern building only because of the older architectural elements already employed on the facade.

In addition to using architectural elements evocative of the old house, several other considerations played an important role in designing the front facade of the new building. The entrance of the old house was marked by dramatic shadows cast by the south and west sunlight. Absence of direct sunlight on the front facade of the new building, due to its northern orientation, was addressed by using multiple tones in horizontal bands to enliven its texture (figure 6). Presence of columns on the front facade (figure 3) also help alleviate the flatness generated by the even north light.



Figure 5: Recycled Doors

The old house is not the only architecture of the past influencing the design of the new building. Architects who grow up in Athens experience daily the ruins of buildings constructed in antiquity, referred to since the seventeenth century as "classical architecture"! Buildings built to

recreate what architects imagined buildings might have been in ancient Greece or Rome have been referred to as "neoclassical."

By contrast, architecture which has been informed by the actual experience of ancient Greek and Roman ruins, could be called "metaclassical." What is being remembered in neoclassical architecture is the memory based on processes of the intellect, on a kind of detective work which searches for clues to recreate what used to be. In "metaclassical" architecture, what is remembered is the ancient buildings as the architect actually has experienced them in their present condition. The architect's memory then constitutes a second source of design inspiration.

The columns that flank the entrances of this building are not all of the same height, resembling the broken remnants of columns of ancient ruins. The short columns have no structural function but



Figure 6: Detail of North Facade of Duplex

do provide support for light fixtures. The columns in the back of the house (figure 7) are partially covered with small square tiles which evoke the broken fluting of worn ancient columns. These tiles also mask imperfections in the casting of the columns, thus turning a problem



**Figure 7: Interior of Duplex**

generated by the skill of the craftsmen into an opportunity for expression.

The back and side facades, as well as the interior plan, employ an architectural vocabulary devoid of any references to the old house. We have to look elsewhere for references and influences, such as, views, solar heat, quality of light, connection of inside and outside, and openness of the house interior.

The back of the house opens up with a curtain wall (figure 7) providing a view of a large old almond tree treasured by the family. In addition to this important view, the desire for passive solar gain and illumination influenced the decision to use glass extensively on the southern exposure.

The interior of the new houses bear little relationship to the interior of the old house. In addition to its visual connection with the outside, large balconies project on the southern side of the building pro-

viding a continuous extension of the public spaces of the two houses with the outdoors. This is a radical departure from the old house.

The new house has an open plan which contrasts with the central hall plan of the old house (figures 8 & 9). The open plan accommodates the new relationship between husband and wife who define the kitchen as a shared domain. On the exterior, the collision of the central window with the gable arch marking the entrance (figure 6) indicates tension between the interior plan and the front facade. There is no ambiguity in this facade — this house does not have a central hall organization. In section, the slope of the hip roof creates sloping ceilings while in the old house the slope of the roof is concealed with flat ceilings. High ceilings are the only interior reference of the new houses to the old.

The open plan reflects a third kind of memory influencing the design process, that provided through architectural

education or apprenticeship. The open plan originated with innovations introduced by Richardson in the 19th century and further developed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The continuity of interior and exterior spaces as well as the sectional congruence between interior and exterior can also be traced to innovations of the masters of modern architecture.

The furnishing of the interior exhibits a similar attitude towards the past as the design of the entire house. The heavily ornamented chairs, heirlooms, provide connection to old experiences, but the glass table, the modern light fixture and the fireplace provide a context for reinterpreting the connotations of such furniture (figure 7). The resulting character of the interior is not one of intimidating formality but of casual elegance.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen in two small architectural projects, a house renovation and a new

duplex house in Maroussi, Greece, illustration of three distinct sources of memory acting on architecture:

1. The personal experiential memories of the clients and future users of the building, are addressed in architectural design as practiced today, only when the architect happens to share experiential memories with the users. This may happen in certain instances, as in the case study presented above. This condition of shared personal experiences between architect/builder and user is probably the most salient difference between academic and vernacular architecture. In vernacular architecture, the designer and the user are either the same person or know each other intimately. In either case, the user's memories and experiences are contributing factors in the design process. This is an area in our increasingly heterogeneous society where both architectural education and practice could be strengthened.

2. The life long experiential memory of the architect is also a very important factor. It is the architect's personal memory of the architecture and features of a certain geographic area which gives his or her work its "regional" flavor. The architectural regionalism that arises from deep memories shaping the sensibilities of an architect can be contrasted with the caricature of the past that results from contrived efforts to overtly manipulate arbitrarily selected symbols and imagery.

3. The collective memory of architecture, that is, the codification and transmission of architectural principles, rules, and theories, through apprenticeship, education, or literature, is the third source of memory in architectural design. Not long ago I had the opportunity to judge student work in Universities located on three continents and was surprised with the likeness of the work. Not only were the teaching methods very similar but the students were reading the same periodicals, and had the same "heroes" and "villains." Distant influences throughout history have been an impor-

tant factor in architecture. However, with the communication revolution we experience at the close of the twentieth century, the possibility of "homogenizing" our built environment increases.

The resolution of this conflict does not lie in denying the importance of distant influences, or trying to stop them, but to moderate them with local influences resulting from users' experiences and memories, as well as with the architect's sensibilities shaped by lifelong experience of an area. The three realms of architectural memory we have discussed here are not hermetically separated or mutually exclusive. The best architecture results when all three factors influence design in significant ways.

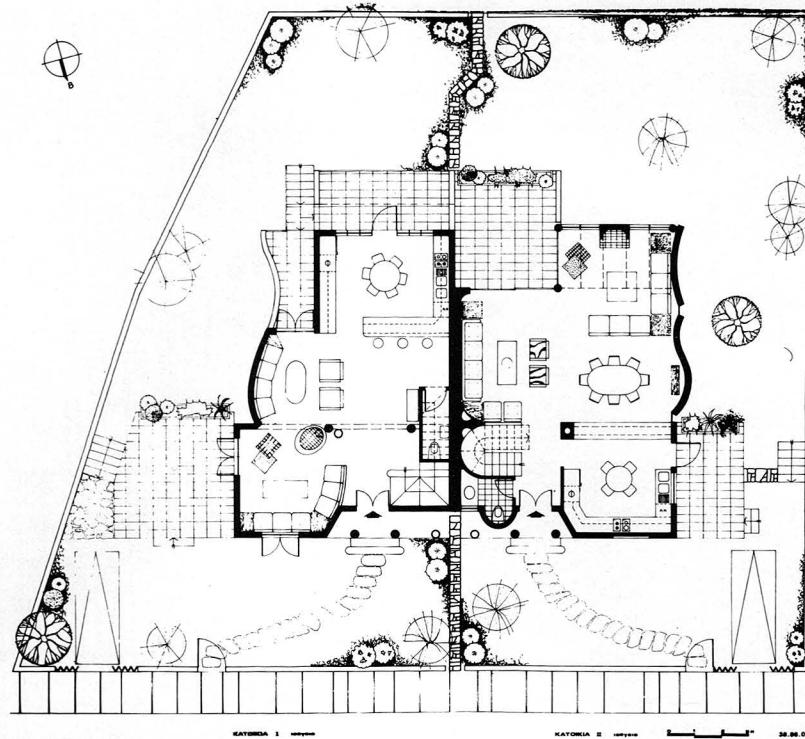


Figure 8: First Level Floor Plan of Duplex

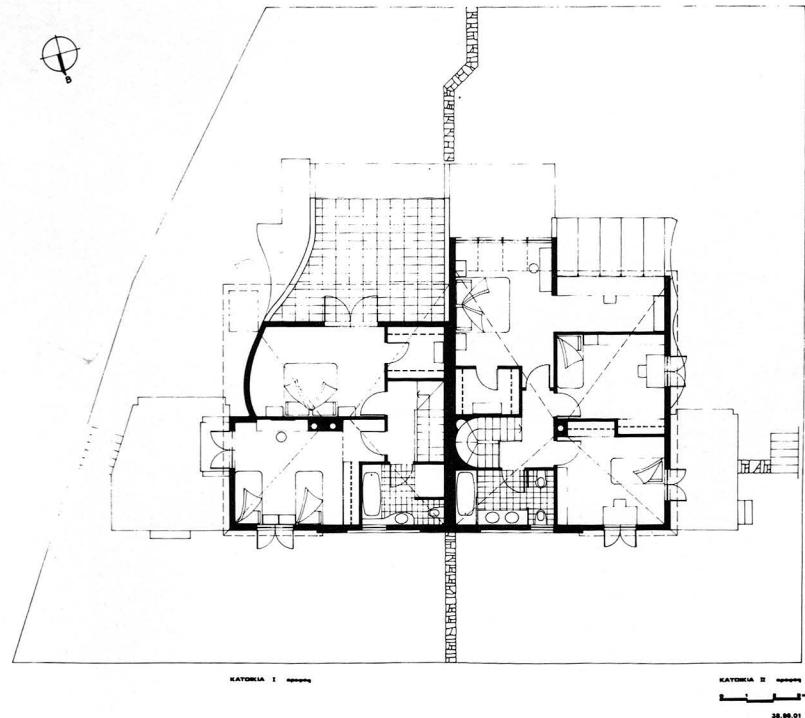


Figure 9: Second Level Floor Plan of Duplex

#### FOOTNOTE

1. The term classical is based on the Roman army and later to social stratification. "Classicus" was the highest Roman social class. It was not until the late Renaissance that "classical" was used with reference to ancient Greek and Roman art and architecture and carried with it the implications of "high class."