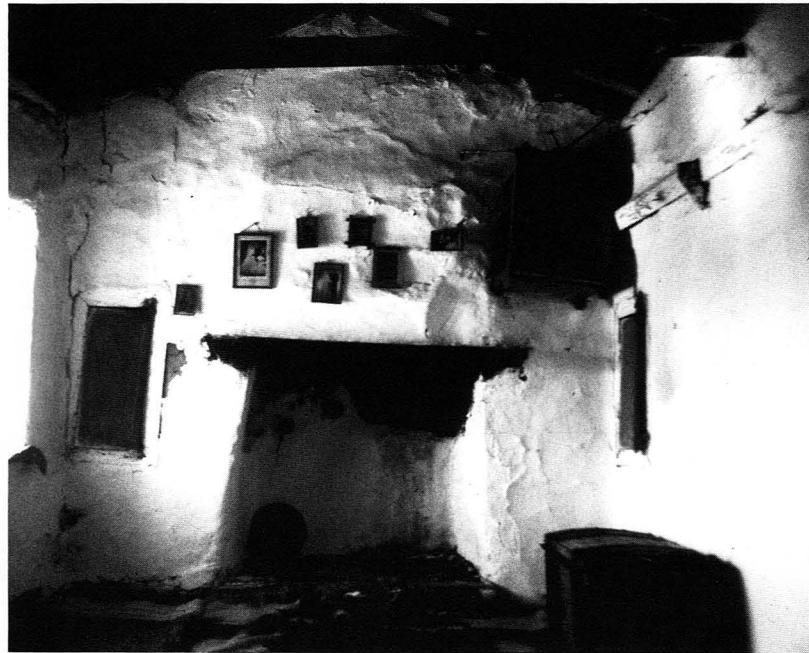


Modernization and the Fireplace in Eressos, A Greek Rural Town

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In function and in symbol, common houses have traditionally provided a satisfying abode. However, with changing cultural values, owners become dissatisfied with the image of their homes and can go to extraordinary efforts to modernize them. This essay examines the evolution of fireplaces during the past one hundred years in the houses of Eressos on the Aegean island of Lesbos, Greece. The recent alteration of fireplaces in these houses has stemmed from the desire to remove features associated with peasant culture.

The material presented here is based on data collected in the community during an eleven month residence in 1977-1978. Research entailed documenting forty houses of different periods and types, and conducting interviews with their inhabitants. In Greece, gaining access to domestic interiors and eliciting information from the occupants is an arduous task under the best of conditions. Eressos was chosen for the study because of ancestral ties, which, together with much patience, facilitated the research process. Eressos has a population of fifteen hundred. The village straddles the slopes of three hills on the northern side of the fertile valley two miles from the sea. The local economy remains traditional, derived from raising livestock on the slopes and crops in the valley below.



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While the findings of this study constitute a reasonable picture of morphological change for fireplaces in Eressos, this information cannot be considered representative of other Aegean communities, even those on Lesbos. Because the region has long been subject to cross-fertilization by many cultures, physical and societal patterns found in one town may differ substantially from those in another nearby.

The fireplace has been an important feature of the house in the Hellen world since prehistoric times. The ancient Greek word for fireplace, *estia*, was also the word for the goddess of domesticity. It is not known when the open hearth, set in the middle of the ancient megaron, was replaced by the fireplace with the chamber and flued chimney. However, these new elements were present in houses throughout Greece, including Lesbos, by the 17th century.

The earliest information concerning Eressos houses, gleaned either from oral sources or from securely dated existing buildings, dates from the mid-19th century. At that time, a fireplace was found in every house and was located in the room most commonly used for a wide range of domestic activities. Food preparation, informal socializing, women's craft production, child rearing, and sleeping all took place in the



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vicinity of the fireplace. In the poorest houses, the room with the fireplace comprised the entire interior.

In addition to providing the center for many domestic activities, the fireplace also served as a focal element for the room and for the entire house. The area above the fireplace is called *phari*. In its minimal form, the *phari* is a simple wooden mantel (Figure 1). Frequently, however, the *phari* is decorated with elaborate plaster

niches consisting of a central cove with smaller ones to either side. These are adorned with small round arches, floral or leaf reliefs, and a heart or a wreath crowned its top (Figures 2-3). Both the heart and the wreath are appropriate symbols since the house is prerequisite to marriage—an important part of the dowry provided by the bride's family. The wreath symbolizes the wedding ceremony because the bride and groom wear floral wreaths on their heads during the

ritual. The heart, of course, is a symbol of love.

Photographs and precious objects belonging to the family are displayed on the *phari*. Its horizontal surfaces are always covered with embroideries, needlepoint, or crochet work. The small niches flanking it are used for placing oil lamps or candles which, along with the fire, provide the only illumination for the room at night (Figures 4-5).

At the turn of the twentieth century, stylistic changes occurred in the *phari's* plaster decoration. The new decorative forms anticipated and accommodated the new political, economic, and cultural order, resulting from Lesbos's secession from the Ottoman Empire and incorporation into the Greek state (1912). The newly introduced stylistic elements—triglyphs, Corinthian columns or pilasters and dentils—were derived from Neo-Classical sources (Figures 6-7).



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Neo-Classicism had developed in Athens and other mainland cities in the 19th century. Ironically, this movement was stimulated by the revival of interest in ancient Greek architecture in England and Germany. In Eressos and elsewhere in Greece, these motifs expressed nationalistic sentiments. Inspiration for a prestigious form shifted from the Ottoman East to the West. Influences on style were derived from Greece and Europe rather than from Asia Minor where

Eressos had maintained economic and cultural ties for many centuries. However, the role of the fireplace as a visual, psychological and functional center of the house was maintained during this period.

After the Second World War, a massive demographic exodus from Eressos and many other rural Greek towns to major urban centers was paralleled by an infusion of urban values into rural areas. A fully developed cash

economy brought Eressos into a much broader market than had previously existed. These developments were reflected in the new and widespread use of coal burning braziers, eliminating the fireplace as a source of heating. As a result, the fireplace chamber was converted into a storage space with the aid of long curtains used to conceal its contents (Figures 2, 8-9). In houses that were modernized, the fireplace chamber was turned into a cupboard with the addition

of a set of doors (Figure 10). Turning the chamber into a cupboard, however, did not affect the plaster motifs of the *phari*, which was maintained as the house's visual focus. The fireplace room and the *phari* continued to be used as before.

The *phari*, which once was a source of pride and delight, acquired connotations of being old-fashioned and associated with backward village ways. By the 1950s, modernization of the



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Eressos house included tearing out the *phari* and enlarging the height of the fireplace cavity to insert a display cabinet known as *vitrina* (Figures 11-13). The top of the *vitrina* has sliding glass or two glass shelves. The bottom half, where the old fireplace chamber used to be, contains a set of drawers. The function of the *vitrina* is to display valuable, decorative objects and photographs, thus assuming the role of the *phari*, and to store good linens and crochet work.

This alteration of fireplace, the removal of storage and display niches, and the elimination of protrusions from the walls transformed the character and function of the space itself. The room was no longer used as the center of the house. Instead it serves as a parlor, occupied only on special occasions.

In present day Eressos, the existing fireplaces and *pharis* are regarded as a source of embarrassment. Families with daughters of marriageable age plan the removal of the fireplace and the

phari as a necessary improvement before giving their house as a dowry. There was one exception to the practice of tearing down the *phari*: the fireplace opening was bricked off, but the *phari* preserved. The owner of the house, the village dentist, was unconcerned about any negative connotations and inquired about the feasibility of transporting the *phari* to his daughter's house in a larger town. However, interest in the aesthetic value and preservation of the *phari* is atypical.

The evolution of the fireplace and its final removal in a Greek rural village sheds light on the difficulties of devising and implementing preservation policies. Most regulations which do not take into account the social measuring of architecture meet resistance and non-compliance from people who experience the pressures of their own cultural milieu. In some cases, biases can be altered or overcome, so that the historical values of an artifact can become appreciated once



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again. Yet in other cases, societal values are sufficiently strong and deep-rooted that this objective may prove fruitless, even counter-productive. Preservation must have meaning for the society in which it exists if it is to endure as a representation of culture.

1. The minimal *phari*, a wooden mantel.
2. The *phari* crowned with a wreath.
3. The *phari* crowned with a heart.
4. Niches flanking the *phari* used for oil lamps for candles.
5. Niches flanking the *phari* used for oil lamps for candles.
6. The *phari* embellished with folk Neo-Classical details.
7. The *phari* embellished with folk Neo-Classical details.
8. The fireplace converted into a nook for storage.
9. The fireplace converted into a nook for storage.
10. The fireplace converted into a cupboard.
11. Removal of the fireplace and *phari* for a *vitrina*.
12. Removal of the fireplace and *phari* for a *vitrina*.
13. Removal of the fireplace and *phari* for a *vitrina*.