

# Refurbishment or Demolition?

## THE FATE OF A 1930s HOUSING COMPLEX IN ATHENS REMAINS PENDING

■ ELISABETH KÁROLYI

**Ambelokipi is a lively and mixed district in central Athens built mainly after World War II. It is home to a complex built in the 1930s to address a severe housing crisis. This group of buildings is not only evidence of the State's engagement in housing at the time, but also an example of modernity that animated Greek architecture in the 1930s. Time, however, has not been kind to the complex. Today, its run-down facades shame the city. The State, eager to demolish the blocks, is fiercely countered by various associations defending this historic area.**

### 1922: OVER A MILLION GREEK REFUGEES ARRIVE IN ATHENS

This episode of Greek history is called "the Smyrna catastrophe." In 1922, the Turkish army invaded the Greek Orthodox enclave of Smyrna in Turkey. Over a million refugees fled to Athens and its surroundings, thus creating entire new districts within the city, and some of those migrants settled in huts nearby, just behind the Lycabettus Hill. In 1933, the State decided to build 228 new apartments to house these refugees, placing architects Kimon Laskaris, who had worked in Paris with Henri Sauvage, and Dimitrios Kyriakos, in charge of the project. Between 1934 and 1939, they built most of the 127 housing complexes, all of which were financed by the State. The Ambelokipi complex is one of Laskaris and Kyriakos's largest housing scheme and undoubtedly the most modern.

### A MODERN CONSTRUCTION

The complex includes eight horizontal blocks laid out in an orthogonal grid. Each block comprises three-story buildings divided into four or five units, each served by its own entrance and staircase. Each unit contains two apartments per level. Service spaces are reduced to a minimum and the flat roofs are equipped with collective washhouses. Each apartment comprises two rooms (one with a balcony), a kitchen and a bathroom. The functionality, luminosity and comfort of these apartments were real luxuries for the inhabitants when they first moved in. The floors, supported by reinforced concrete

À AMBELOKIPI, UN QUARTIER VIVANT DU CENTRE D'ATHÈNES, PRINCIPALEMENT CONSTRUIT APRÈS LA SECONDE GUERRE MONDIALE, S'ÉRIGENT SUR UN PLAN ORTHOGONAL HUIT PETITES BARRES D'HABITATIONS À TROIS NIVEAUX.

CONSTRUITES DANS LES ANNÉES TRENTE POUR ENDIGUER LA GRAVE CRISE DU LOGEMENT, ELLES TÉMOIGNENT DE L'ENGAGEMENT DE L'ÉTAT ET DU SOUFFLE DE MODERNITÉ QUI ANIMENT ALORS LE PAYS. AUJOURD'HUI, LES FAÇADES DÉGRADÉES DE CET ENSEMBLE FONT HONTE À LA VILLE. UNE LUTTE SOURDE SE DÉROULE ENTRE L'ÉTAT, QUI VEUT RASER LES BARRES, ET LES ASSOCIATIONS DE DÉFENSE DE CE QUARTIER HISTORIQUE.

beams, are made of cement covered with terrazzo (a common finish in Greece) or parquet. Walls are load-bearing with interior walls built of brick and exterior walls of stone, covered by a rendering coat. Even though the Greeks quickly adopted the modernist style and spatial layout, they continued to use traditional methods of building for a long time after.

The complex was considered a pure expression of the Bauhaus culture and, moreover, represented the State's involvement in the cause of the Asia Minor refugees.

### THE DEGRADATION OF THE BUILDING

The Ambelokipi complex never was social housing. Its inhabitants acquired their apartments at market price immediately after they were built. The buildings' façades



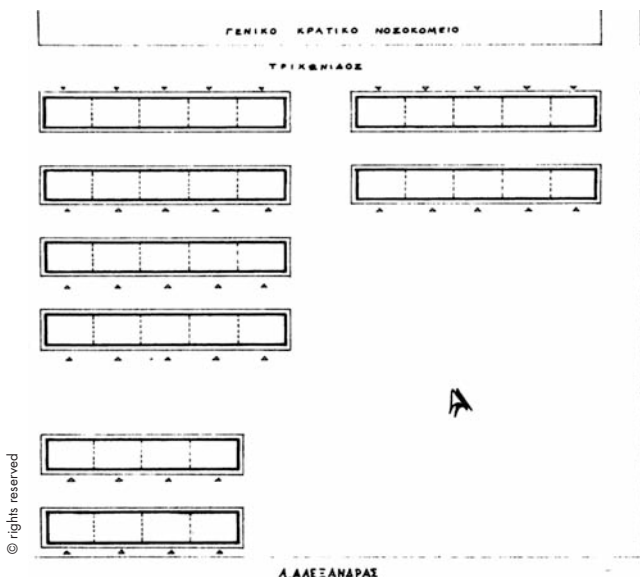
Fig. 1. Ambelokipi, the complex in 1934

endured the Civil War (1944), numerous earthquakes, and a pronounced lack of maintenance, because the homeowners did not have the financial means to make necessary renovations. The degradation of the blocks and the rise of living standards account for the flight of many residents during the 1960s. In 1967 the parliament voted to demolish the blocks, to make way for a park for the adjacent Supreme Court. Nothing followed that decision but it remains valid to this day, consequently discouraging any rehabilitation initiatives.

**2004 OLYMPIC GAMES:  
CONTROVERSY GETS HEATED**

As the 2004 Olympic Games approached, the State decided that the complex would be demolished. Alexandras Avenue, on which the blocks are located, was to be one of the main Olympic thoroughfares and thousands of cameras from the world over would be watching. The State feared that the outrageously decrepit Ambelokipi blocks would discredit the city and thus started to expel their residents to allow the buildings' demolition to begin. However, a group of thirty homeowners resisted. This group, led by architect Evtaxopoulos Dimitris, is actively supported by the National Union of Greek Architects, the Athens School of Architecture, and the Greek chapter of Docomomo. The Ambelokipi complex's supporters want to preserve both its architectural and historical heritage and also accuse the State of giving way to investors, who would soon turn the aforementioned park project into offices and shops. As a response to the pressure to preserve, the State proposed to keep two of the eight blocks bearing witness to modern architecture as well as to "Smyrna catastrophe." In 2004, these two blocks were listed as historic monuments but just before the Olympics, the fate of the other blocks was still not settled and the façades facing Alexandras Avenue turned into a tragicomic spectacle. Doors and windows of expropriated homes were barricaded with wooden boards, shutters and coatings were falling apart and politically engaged artists drew on its walls to protest

Fig. 2. Ambelokipi, master plan of the complex area



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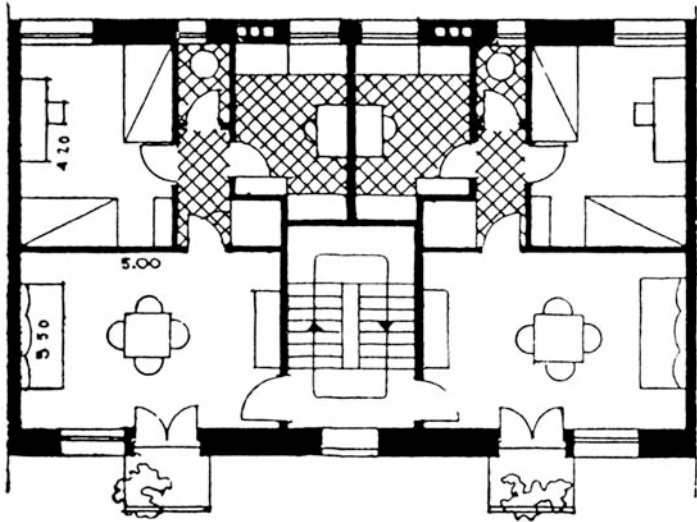


Fig. 3. Ambelokipi floorplan

against a State that is only concerned with financial matters. Thus, a canvassed serigraphy of the Athens's Acropolis ended up hypocritically covering the deteriorated facades the day the Olympic Games began, but by the next day the tarp had been ripped down.

**NEVER-ENDING MODERNISM:  
THE 1930s COMPLEX IS STILL ADAPTABLE  
TO CONTEMPORARY LIFESTYLES**

When the apartment blocks were built in 1934, Ambelokipi was still surrounded by fields. Today, the area is considered part of the city center. There is a metro station nearby and Alexandras Avenue is one of the

capital's busiest arteries. The other apartment buildings, lying side by side, generally have seven floors. There are still many little shops and the number of restaurants, bars and cinemas is constantly growing. In addition to its residential and small-scale commercial use, Ambelokipi is also an office and public institution district. These multiple uses make it a very lively quarter, during the day as well as at night, and this explains why investors view it as propitious land to build luxury apartments, shops and offices. To investors, the 1930s complex is obsolete and its layout outdated.

RESPECTING modern city planning principles utilized in designing the complex would, however, be very much appreciated in this busy area. Applied on a reduced zone in the heart of the city, the orthogonal grid surrounding the blocks (now used as a parking lot), the zoning (the complex only has apartments) and the low-rise buildings provide over 12,000 sq.m. of peaceful living environment: exactly what lacks in the surrounding urban network. Architect Evtaxopoulos Dimitris, who has lived in the complex since he was born, suggests that implementing an underground parking lot would empty the alleys separating the blocks and allow green spaces to develop, thus finally respecting the initial design concepts of modern mass housing.

Some of the flat roofs used by women to wash their laundry have recently become extensions to homes—places where friends come over for dinner on summer nights. Some of the complex's last inhabitants have merged two apartments together and widened their

Fig. 4. Façade looking on Alexandras Avenue with a tarp representing the Olympic mascots demolishing the complex, January 2004



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Fig. 5. Rear façade of an apartment block, January 2004

In addition to the thirty homeowners (out of the original 228) who still live in the complex, about fifty apartments are occupied by squatters. Members of disadvantaged social classes, Kurdish and Turkish immigrants all live here together, peacefully. “They are nice, calm and they work,” a neighbor says. Although the squatters do not have running water and need to use public electricity their homes are, on the whole, comfortably equipped.

#### CURRENT SITUATION

Although at the end of 2004, the State Council stipulated the conservation and renovation of all the apartment blocks to the purpose of preserving heritage, its decision could be revoked at any time if the ministry or the parliament decides otherwise. The buildings have been decaying for years now and the State has done nothing yet. This is partially due to the public’s lack of interest, but is also a result of the fact that the State does not care, its priorities being other than preservation.

It may end up being the Panathinaikos stadium, located in front of the complex, which will determine Ambelokipi’s fate. Approximately a year from now, the arena is due to move to the suburbs, to be replaced by a new urban program which will most likely include the area of the apartment blocks. The Greek State has undertaken several big renovation projects since the 1990s, including the city’s refurbishment before the Olympic Games, and the restructuring and expansion of its road network. But will the State ever attend to its urban planning issues?

Mass housing has rarely been built in or near city centers, like the Ambelokipi complex was; this is why these apartment blocks are so significant and must be preserved. Knocking them down would be demolishing a paradigm of modern urbanism and architecture that has proved it can be functional and appreciated in a traditional urban network.

Once rehabilitated, Ambelokipi would ideally become an example for the re-integration of suburbs within the cities that engulf them.

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Fig. 6. Façade looking onto Alexandras Avenue: most of the inhabitants have been evicted, Spring 2004

rooms. “The building is absolutely adaptable,” explains Dimitris. He adds, “the inhabitants’ [living] conditions are very good—insulation is not a problem, light penetrates all apartments and, in opposition to what the media says, damage caused by earthquakes is not structural.” This challenges the State’s argument that the construction does not fulfill anti-seismic regulations.

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