Book Review

The Creation of Modern Athens, Planning the Myth Eleni Bastéa, Cambridge University Press, 2000, ISBN 0 521 64110 9

This is a scholarly book about the creation of modern Athens after the Greek war of Independence in 1821 which saw Athens developing from a provincial town of 10,000 inhabitants in 1835 to a modern capital of 125,000 by the end of the 19th Century.

The main academic contribution of the text is in the critical discussion of the role that architecture and planning had in the development of the new national Greek identity after 400 years of Turkish occupation. The question addressed is, to what extent is architecture capable of making this new identity visible to the people through 'form', 'meaning' and 'public debate'? Through the case of Athens it, the book tests the notion of architectural determinism working not simply in behavioural terms, but in influencing culture and national identity. Bastéa offers a balanced reflection on this issue.

Before considering the role of architecture and planning there is a well researched account of the historical, political and economic conditions in Greece during this period and how these influenced the shaping of the new Greek identity. Discussion of how other factors influenced the new identity and consciousness is illustrated in the debate of what constituted the concept of 'people' (*laos*, *ethnos*, *genos*, *phyle*). The conflict facing the Greek Government in developing this new identity is also seen in the philological discussion related to the adoption of a common Greek Language, notably between '*Katharevousa*' – purer Greek related to classical Greek – and '*demotike*' – popular spoken Greek. This conflict was also echoed in the various plans of Athens and the image of various imposing public buildings initiated and designed by foreign architects inspired by neo-classical ideals versus the traditional 'lived in' vernacular architecture.

The planning of Athens, Bastéa argue has to be understood in its international context as well as its image in Greece itself and amongst Greeks living abroad – the Greek diaspora. Athens, through its public building, such as the University, Academy

National Library, Royal Palace, National Gallery and Museum, became the epitome of Greek identity offering a shining light, a spiritual centre for all Greeks encouraging the Greek diaspora to return home. These buildings also offered a visual link between the buildings of ancient Greece and the new neo-classical buildings in other European capitals.

The shaping of this new Greek identity through the Government and public participation is also illustrated by Bastéa in other liberated parts of Greece. For example in the Peloponese where the people of Maytvas in 1829, requested rebuilding the old city of Sparta in the style of simple building designs reminiscent of Ancient Sparta – a case where the glory of the past and the economic reality of the times were in conflict.

The book constitutes the first serious attempt to look at architecture, planning and urban design in the 19th Century Athens seen through the eyes of an architect adopting objective historical methods and original research in the local archives. It is a well written, scholarly piece of work successfully moving from a dissertation to a book, offering 50 pages of notes to text and references which should interest not only architects and planners but the increasing number of people engaged in interdisciplinary research and cultural history. It should also interest the serious general reader, although I would have preferred a more explicit discussion of the various plans of Athens with the help of some redrawn maps or sketches for comparative purposes.

A beautifully produced book with many revealing illustrations, such as the oil painting on the front jacket depicting the arrival of King Otto in Athens in 1835 in front of a few hundred people, to a modern capital of over 2 million people hosting the Olympic games in 2004. In fact Bastéa sensitively discusses the historic impact of the first modern Olympic games held in Athens in 1896 immersed in the Olympic ideals of cooperation and competition with the polemic storm of 1897.

Byron Mikellides
The School of Architecture
Oxford Brookes University