

PROJECT AREA NO 1:

OLD ATHENS

The decision to demolish nearly all buildings on the north-western slopes of the Acropolis is not a new one. As soon as Athens became the capital of Greece after the revolutionary war of 1821, plans were drawn indicating just that.

The rationale of such a decision can only be understood in terms of the Romantic Movement of the 19th century which took an interest in ruins of antiquity and especially of the Classic period. It was this sort of romanticism that prompted the august German architect Leo Von Klenze to propose the destruction of Byzantine churches, which in his view were defiling the classic landscape. Such was the strength of this imported feeling, that to this day it colours the sentiments of many officials and ordinary citizens in Greece, not to speak of archaeologists.

Had these plans been carried out immediately, we would not have been wasting our energies writing about them today. But they were not. Wrangles over survey lines, conflicting interests, lack of funds to expropriate, and a sudden influx of refugees left that area more or less undisturbed as a growing community for nearly a century. Then, suddenly, in the 1930's, the first large scale demolition was carried out to enable the American Archaeological School to conduct excavations in the ancient agora.

The Second World War and the Civil War that followed, put a damper on the plans to continue expropriations and demolitions. But the plans were not forgotten, and during the fifties the files were reactivated and the slow process of expropriation resumed its course.

Meanwhile a different sort of 'romanticism' has begun to emerge: a clear look at one's more immediate heritage has begun to take hold of people's hearts. There is a growing desire for continuity with the living past of one's fathers and grandfathers, made all the more urgent by

the cataclysmic transformations of cities and landscapes after the war. There is also an urgent plea by the more sensitive and educated people of all countries to salvage what little remains of a more integrated and sane life, before greed and crudeness devour the last memories of it.

The irony, however, in the case of Plaka and Anaphiotika, the two districts surrounding the Acropolis, is that it is not land speculators that wish these districts destroyed, but the paragons of cultural preservation - the archaeologists themselves. But the irony does not end here. Had it not been for the fact that this area was set aside for archaeological excavations back in the 19th century, there would have been no Plaka and Anaphiotika today. These areas would have been swept away like the rest of Athens, and their modest 2 and 3 storey neoclassic houses would have been replaced by modern 8 storey apartment buildings. Saviour angel and executioner, the Archaeological Service still hovers over the district, while equally strong commercial interests weave their way inside the twisting lanes of the old town to lay traps for the unwary tourists in defiance of both archaeologists and conservationists. Close on their heels come the ubiquitous automobile and the parking lot.

Today we are no longer looking at the homogeneous integrated neighbourhood of the late 19th and early 20th century. Rather we are looking at a dismembered body rent asunder by angels, vultures and well meaning citizens. Each has an image the district must live up to. Each is blind to the other's vision.

Such was the stage when we arrived. In the following article, Charles Haynes, a 2nd year student, representing a foreigner's point of view, is drawn into the argument with no less passion and love than the Greeks themselves.

