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Pirgos Peiraia

The Repair of the City and the Re-establishment of Urbanity with the Spatial and Iconic Activation of a Vertical Wasteland

Abstract (long version)

„Architecture’s poetic dimension does not arise from an autonomous aesthetic that is freely developed but from the orchestration of place itself, from the faith in the beauty and depth of reality.“ (Roger Diener, 2011)

In the middle of the hectic – almost chaotic – heterogeneous space of the port of the Greek town Piraeus reposes a sleeping giant: the Pirgos Peiraia (Piraeus Tower). With its height of 85 meter the high-rise rises from the not even half as high city like an alien. It is empty, unused since its construction in the 1970ies and existent only as an image in the perception of the city. A vertical wasteland, used only as supporting structure for large-scale commercial messages.

The present thesis takes this specific situation as a starting point for an analysis of the relation between high-rise and city, of the (in the most cases unexploited) possibilities of the integration in its neighborhood and the potential to generate a considerable surplus for the city.

In contrast to the majority of the past decades high-rise projects – and as well to an architectural idea competition announced 2010 for a redesign of the pirgos’ facade – the present thesis and design are not reducing architecture to a building and the building to its surface. Architecture, city and society are inseparably linked to each other, every building that is constructed in a city is also taking part in the construction of the city. The borderline between urbanism and architecture has not only become diffuse, it is increasingly vanishing (Ernst Hubeli). They share a common destiny.

Consequently, the physically outstanding and well visible Pirgos Peiraia is conceived as a tool, an instrument of urban development or, more generally speaking, the high-rise as an urban project.

The eight essays of the first, theoretical part of the thesis and the photographic essay placed in front have to be read as a discussion on the city of Athens and its architecture, on the typology of high-rise buildings, on image and space that goes far beyond a pragmatic analysis only preparing for the design. It could as well stand on its own. The – subjective – photo-essay „Perfected Imperfection“ is intentionally left un-commented to encourage an individual approach to the contemporary Athens.

After a brief characterization of the rather undefined and contradictory identity and the immanent dichotomy of today’s Athens (and its little sister Piraeus), the chapter „The occurred city“ highlights Athens’ fast development to a metropolis, the attempts to plan and develop it in a controlled way and their failure as well as the consequences of the resulting nearly anarchical growth. The enormous land-use, the hardly manageable traffic with all its consequences for man and environment evolves from an individualism getting out of hand, a laissez-fair urbanism.

The Polykatoikia typology shapes as the ubiquitous generic element every Greek city. It is at the same time symptom and accelerator of the privatization of the city, an instrument of urban densification and concretizes in the seemingly homogeneous sea of houses of Athens.

As the Polykatoikia can be called the „Greek niece“ of Le Corbusiers Maison Dom-ino, the essay „Modern Times? The Greek face of Modernism“ searches for Modernism in the architecture and urbanism of Athens.

„Concrete Carpet Instead of Towers“ examines the excessive spread of Athens as a seemingly homogeneous concrete carpet. One reason for that development (and also for the outstanding solitary role of the Pirgos Peiraia) is the ban on high-rise buildings that has been decreed in the 1980ies after a short period in which not even 20 high-rises have been built and that applies until today.

The chapter „High-rise: Built Image and Image of Building“ considers high-rises in their immanent conflict between constructive-structural building and the creation of symbols and icons in a historic overview and analysis the status quo of the question „Image or building, symbol or construction? Or both?“

„The Inevitable Return of the Image (that actually never has been gone)“ highlights one central aspect in architecture since postmodernism: the image (or the sign) and its role in construction. The Pirgos Peiraia exists yet only as an image and is as such used for commercial purpose (for instance as carrier of a monumental Johnny Walker). The relevance and the meaning of signs and images in architectural and social cityscape is the focus of the concluding essay „The Decorated City“. This text should be understood also as a starting point for continuative theoretical and artistic engagement with the relationship of image and city. Yet no final conclusions are drawn, but the wide field of images and signs in urban space, from banal commercials to subtle and subversive art is examined and the urban picture overkill discussed critically.

The second part „Lefkos Pirgos and Ypsilos Dromos“ condenses the acquired in a design that responds very closely to the context of the place – its structure, function and meaning – and formalizes the architectural and social attitude.

Pirgos Peiraia is awakened to reality from its almost 40 years lasting sleep and integrated in the hectic coexistence, cooperation, conflict and – most of all – confusion of the heterogeneous port. The broad context opened by the eight essays of the first part enables a comprehensive approach that considers the city and its identity, the potentials and dangers of the high-rise typology, the dialectic of building and image and the contemporary life at the specific location. The design doesn't juxtapose the topics side by side, but tries to interweave them with each other and form them into a clear and simple architecture. To an architecture that respects all influences and given circumstances, formulates and formalizes an architectural and social attitude and, at the same time, is offering maximal openness, determining as few as possible.

Space and image, interaction and iconicity, close and far are identified as the horizontal and the vertical dimension of a high-rise in context which constitute a dialectic pair. The verticality of the tower is completed with its counterpart – a horizontal element: the Ypsilos Dromos (Elevated Path). It not only connects the building with its surrounding but also the various spaces among each other. The more than 350 meter long and twice folded, not as pure transitorial but as habitable space verbalized Ypsilos Dromos bridges the barrier of the main harbour road, crosses the high-rise, comprises the enlarged marketplace and integrates the projected monorail inside the port. Yet first of all it connects city and port also on an emotional level: by the view oft the leaving over the docks with its countless ferrys and by the view oft he arriving into the city.

The new (and re-)created space redeems what the dominantly towering sign of the Pirgos Peiraia promised for four decades: a center of urban life. Harbor and city are interlaced again, the existing urban fabric and the squares that have been increasingly fragmented during the years are again made tangible for residents and visitors and usable as public space. Historic spatial relations are (among other by the reconstruction of the 1972 demolished old townhall Roloi that was symbolically representing the seaport as a reminding sign in the form of a 1:1 solid model) re-established and new spatial sequences are created.

The Pirgos Peiraia itself becomes the Lefkos Pirgos (White Tower). To free the building from its isolation the first couple of floors is radically opened – undressed – and with that a new (and old) public space is re-established. (Until the „Piraeus Trade Center“ has been constructed by the then governing Junta with the hope to succeed on the global market, a local and real marketplace existed in its place.) What remains is the naked tectonic concrete structure that connects the horizontal and vertical seemingly contact-less.

The building is, according to its location at the port with its intrinsic confrontation with the new and the stranger, appropriated with functions all about the production and presentation of young art and culture. Studios for artists, a boardinghouse, a theatre, an art-gallery and a library are completed with gastronomy use on the top floors and the traditional, small-sized, informal and temporary organized uses as market, with small gastronomy, periptera (kiosks) and street vendors that have always been here and now, on the Ypsilo Dromo and around the Lefko Pirgo are given the space that copes with their role in Greek everyday life. Symbolically for the integration into the existing city structure stands the configuration of the Ypsilo Dromo which refers to the streets' orthogonality and implements the change of scale between the port and its backstreets as well as the Ypsilos Dromos' flooring, which adopts and continues the irregular and improvisational pavements of Athens' streets.

The immanent iconic power of a high building is concretized as a White Void, as antithesis to the white noise of the urban picture overkill. Instead of taking part in the by now well-rehearsed neoliberal concert of short-term sensationalism, in originality at any cost, the Lefkos Pirgos is reduced to its intrinsic size and archaic primary shape, to its physical presence. Instead of being dominated by the (commercial) image on the building, architecture itself, the essential idea of building becomes visible. As a translucent white volume, the tower inverts the concept of a „white cube“: The inside is not the neutral space of (re-)presentation of art, but a still raw space of production of art. The facade, appearing at the same time covering and uncovering addresses the dialectic of envelope and structure, appearance and reality and as an „enigmatic signifier“ (Charles Jencks) makes one wonder about the content, just like a covered ancient icon. As an „automonument“ (Rem Koolhaas) the pair Lefkos Pirgos and Ypsilos Dromos establishes a simple form that does not need to immediately express the complexity it internalizes (Ullrich Schwarz), an architecture that poetry does not arise from its autonomous aesthetics but from the faith in the place and the staging of it (Roger Diener). A sign against the (self-involved) signs is given. There isn't produced an architectural spectacle but established an architecture that offers an urban stage for the social spectacle.

*„Yes, it's f***ing contextual!“ (inspired by Skunk Anansie, 1996)*