

City of Corfu : The Transformation of the Physiognomy of a Capital City To A Provisional One Through Testimonies From Literature

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1 INTRODUCTION

The historical line of a city has a significant impact in the formation of its physical and emotional physiognomy which the city projects. It plays a major part in the creation of the speech (logos) and myth (mythos) that determines each significant urban formation. Let us not forget that the speech and the myth establish the ideological foundations of a city. However, the historical context does not only influence the above two elements of its physiognomy; it also plays a central part in the formation of its society, and the architectural space is a significant factor in determining society formation, according to the theories of Rossi, Hiller and Hanson¹; in turn both society and architecture are defined significantly by the historical and, consequently, social events.

In addition, we should not forget that the inheritance of the historical events in a city determines the social, political and economic system that governs the city. His system, according to Joseph and Julia Stefanou², is the main factor for the physiognomy of the city, since it influences its form, style, size and development. Nobody can argue that one of Vienna's most celebrated characteristics was the period in history when the city was the capital of the empire of the Hapsburgs. Similarly, all the other historical events that happened in the same space have also left their traces in the image of the city. Another example is that of Venice, a city that projects through its current image its history as the naval and commercial metropolitan capital of Medieval and Renaissance.

However, though we all recognise the city as a witness and evidence of its historical past, we usually overlook other sources of its history where the city still maintains a main part. Moreover, the participation and visibility of the urban space in other forms of historical text reinforces its dominance of certain periods of time. This omission usually occurs due to the fact that in the indirect sources of historical facts, the presentation of the historical reality is not usually the main objective. In this case, the historical reality of the city is view through its reflection. However, the presence of the urban space establishes reinforces realistic the narration of the historical event, since it sets the 'scene' for the action, offering a realistic backdrop to engulf the story.

2 HISTORICAL SOURCES IN RELATION WITH THE URBAN LANDSCAPE. (THE CITY AS A SOURCE OF HISTORY)

The historical landscape of a city is embedded in its monuments and the written narrations that relate with the city. As A. Rossi suggests, there are two major principles that helps us to comprehend the development of a city; its city planning blueprint and its monuments that are visibly the most important elements for the city and present a sense of historical cohesion together with the memories that creates to its population. But there are other elements that express the history of the urban space. One of those elements is literature, which has proven to play an important role in the creation of the myth and speech (logos) of the city. Literature gains social importance and presence in the world through the interaction with politics, law, technology, language, education, property, individual creativity and the other cultural traditions and thoughts regarding significant issues. In this way, literature is incorporated in the mechanisms and codes that society uses to transform the random incidents into meaningful signs. Since we mainly talk about naturalistic fictional narrative, the writer is obliged to proceed carefully checking the accuracy of facts and details in order to recreate places and social activities.

Let us not forget that in early antiquity historical incidents were reported through poetry (Homer) or other forms of literature. As literature was developing its links with historical narration were integrated. Many

¹ URBAN DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY, NTUA, The Physiognomy of the Hellenic City, National Technical University of Athens Publications, Athens 2000

² STEFANO, J., & STEFANO, J., Description of the Image of the City, University Publications, National Technical University of Athens, 1999

historians have declared that poetry, paintings, novels, folk songs and art in general have allowed in many cases academic researchers and scientists to analyse historical events and let them experience the historical moment in a way that no other historical source could.³

Within narrative fiction, the writer has the opportunity to narrate the city's historical background and bring into life. The buildings, the streets, the people and their activities constitute the canvas for the writer to paint a picture of reality to wrap his or hers fictional story. On the other hand we have to consider that there are certain limitations to the use of novels and other forms of literature as historical documents, as in the use of other primary or secondary documents. Perhaps the most evident is that of literary license, the freedom of the author of the fiction to manipulate historical facts or events for purposes of literary effect or style. This is a question that must be determined as well in the use of all other fictional works. Hence the reader must be reminded to judge literature for its value as a historical document with the same critical questions and methods as one judges all other potential sources⁴.

3 RESEARCH APPLICATIONS

Due its significance in defining human progression, the city of Corfu has been naturally the subject of many research projects and studies; amongst those, key are the studies regarding the image of the city and the ways that this image is being projected. In every circumstance, city space or the city itself projects a mixture of its eternal and temporary elements, as they are defined by the behavior of its inhabitants collectively as well as individually. The orientation of those characteristic elements is a constant quest, since life in the city is ever changing, unstoppable, progressing in fast pace. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the facts that the very elements of the physiognomy of a city are established and documented as necessary knowledge for the smooth running of one's life. Simultaneously, the physiognomy of an urban built space produces certain impressions that lead to the formation of opinions regarding the space that determine the attitudes or actions that people will take towards this particular environment. Finally, the elements of the physiognomy of the city will also create to the individual a set of concepts, which in return manifest the different ways they experience the city through all their senses.

A series of abstract (immaterial) values comprises the myth and the written artifacts of the urban landscape, two important factors for defining its physiognomy. Such factors are the history evidenced in the written and monumental, physical form (it includes also politics, economic and cultural history), folk tradition, social anthropology and literature. The latter in particular is a very strong factor in mapping the city's image, since it involves rational and emotional elements. In addition, literature is essential in promoting to the reading audience this particular image that will create expectations, emotional involvement and sightseeing interests.

There is the opportunity to conduct a research on the stimuli that novelists have received from a specific space as well as the ways that they developed these stimuli in their novels. In the next stage it would be interesting to measure how much impact these novels had in the reading audience and record the emotional and mental expectations they generated to real and virtual visitors. The conclusions from this type of study and research would assist the architects and city planners in making decision towards their redevelopment and regeneration plans as they will understand not only the space's functionality and physical formations but also the social and psychological impact it has in the human collective conscience.

In addition, this kind of research, if used in an organised process, aims to preserve the physiognomy of certain city's areas with significant historical or traditional elements. Especially for the city of Corfu the historical fact that it used to be a capital city at one point transformed its architectural identity. Every research that looks into presenting this transformation from a metropolis to a regional city of a new state, it could also help to identify the elements whose preservation or regeneration could enhance the city's physiognomy, inform its restoration and functionality that had in its historical past. The application of this

³ OSCAR HUNDLIN, *Truth In History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1979

GORDON A. CRAIG, *History As A Humanistic Discipline*, in *Historical Literacy : The Case Of History in American Education*, Paul Cagnon, MacMillan, New York 1989

JOHN DEWEY, *Art as Experience*, Minton, Balch & Co, New York 1934

E. W. EISNER, *Cognition and Curriculum*, Longman Press, New York 1982

⁴ CHARLES W MACUNE, *Latin American Literature as a Source of History*, in *The History Teacher* vol. 22, 1988, p 500

research could also help local authorities plan their policies around tourism and education activities around historical and architectural monuments.

4 THE CASE OF CORFU: THE HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

Corfu had always been in the route of ships and migration; a city that offered refuge to a mixture of people from different cultural backgrounds. It had always been in the crossroads of two worlds – the East and the West – and therefore its society had to deal with both. The ability of the city throughout its history to integrate constantly new rulers, civilisations and citizens without any struggle had given Corfu an iconic status as a cosmopolitan European city. Corfu has an excellent geographical position within the Mediterranean and this has often determined the city's major historical role. Apart from the meeting place of populations, Corfu has assimilated cultures and ideologies, and achieved a co-habitation of different elements in harmony.

The city had been a shelter for the Byzantines when Constantinople came under the Ottoman Empire (1453), for the Greeks who fled to the West (1669), for Albanians and Slaves when they were under pressure from the Ottoman rule in 15th and 16th century, and many members of Corfu's aristocracy were descended from those nations. Similarly it was a city shelter for the refugees Souliotes (1800-1815), as well as the Italian rebels of the 19th century. At its harbour was sheltered for a few days the princess sister of French king Louis 16th when prosecuted by the Jacobean. Everybody who passed through Corfu has left its traces in the collective memory of the city. The fact that none of the monuments of any minority that passed through the island was destroyed purposely, shows how respected this collective memory was.

In more recent history (14th to 19th century), Corfu was the first of the Ionian islands to be separated from mainland Greece – this division was administrative only. Corfu shared apart from its geographical proximity with mainland Greece a strong sense of common language, culture and tradition. However, the city and mainland were fated to follow different historical paths for some time. While avoiding the Ottoman rule, Corfu turned to the West to establish strong administrative, economic and social connections; the island came under the rule of different western states, mainly that of Venice. Corfu's geographical position and its proximity to Italy - a gateway to the Adriatic sea – contributed to its prosperity as a naval, strategic and commercial base. Although it was constantly under the fear of invasion from foreign states and beside the fact that the different invaders left their signature in the architecture of the city, in essence Corfu was another Greek city whose local cultural characteristics were developed gradually without ever being forcefully interrupted. The architecture of the city is distinguished for its western influences; however, these 'foreign' elements are adapted to fit a Greek city. The buildings follow the western morphology but they are built by local craftsmen who follow the Greek and Byzantine maxim of adapting everything to the human level.

The society that developed through the six centuries of co-habitation of the indigenous population of Corfu and the Latin West, is distinguished for the special characteristics which on one hand are also barriers for its identification as a pure Western or a pure mainland Greek city; Corfu remains a hybrid. The results of this co-habitation can be seen even today. Within the Balkans, Corfu is one of the few places whose building avoided any Ottoman influences, unlike any other part of eastern Mediterranean. It managed to progress with a civilization that is based on Greek tradition but it also has Italian influences.

Its turbulent Mediaeval years ended with its integration under the rule of Venice in 1386 and it remained under the Venice rule till 1797. The Venetian rule left its signature in the architectural physiognomy of the city. As it was at the edge of the Ottoman Empire, Venetians invested in the city with a set of fortifications, which were designed and executed by leading architects and civil engineers of the time. In particular, in 15th and 16th century the Old and New Fortress were built. Its construction was a combined effort of craft, science and innovation – it was a success of man-made work over wild nature. Mountains were reduced to plains, harbours were built, new inlets were created, fortresses were erected; as the Venetian member of the Council Nicolo Zeno observed, "the place was strong by nature, but with our art it has now become unconquered".

For a little over than 120 years (1669 to 1797), Corfu remained the capital of the Easter part of the Venetian Democracy, the last European fortress – together with Vienna – to abort the Ottoman Empire's imperialistic plans during the 17th and 18th century. Corfu was a city synonymous with the defence for the preservation of the European civilisation.

The 'neo-Corfu civilisation' that developed throughout this historical period was a variation of the central European one. However, Corfu had chosen to be fully incorporated in the European cultural landscape without losing its special identity and its Greek, Jewish, Latin roots. Some evidence of this is the emergence of opera and lyric theatre, during the 17th century. Italian companies were competing for a slot in the central theatre. Even Casanova comments in his Autobiography that he felt 'at home' during his stay in the city for two to three years as captain in the Venetian Navy circa 1726.

In 1797 French Democrats invade the island and claim it as the heirs to the Venetian Democracy. They will soon be replaced by the allied forces of the Russians and Ottomans who put the foundations for an independent state of the Ionian Islands under the protection of the Sultan. After a very short period when the island and the city are under the rule of Emperor Napoleon, the Ionian State is established as an independent state under the protection of the British Empire. The establishment of the British rule follows with the appointment of a British Commissioner, his administration and his army. At the same time we see the establishment of significant institutions such as the first Greek university and a Parliament that will be the place for debate for new political ideas.

Since the 18th century we see the presence in the local community of a strong powerful class, a feudal aristocracy, who managed to assimilate all the foreign aristocrats and maintain a level of independence towards the central government. Moreover, we have the absence of a Church administrative structure, Catholic or Orthodox, due to the competition of Venice with Papal Rome. This is quite unique in relation with the structure of society being developed in mainland Greece. This new form of society developed in Corfu was more devoted to progressive thought and as a result it created many inspirational personalities.

In this Corfu is where Empress of Austria Sissy decides to retire, leaving through her stay one of the most characteristic monuments of this era, a combination of Austrian sensitivities and the empress personal taste; the elegant villa of 'Achilleon' is till today one of the most popular monuments in Corfu with a high number of visitors each year.

From the beginning of 1860s, Great Britain has decided to withdraw its high protection on the island and the Ionian State. Taking its cue from the coronation of the new Danish prince George as the King of Greece, Great Britain announces the agreement for the unification of the Ionian islands to mainland Greece. This decision was a result of negotiations that impose hard terms on the Greek side. The agreement announces neutrality of Corfu (maintaining free passage through its waters) – this results in the demolition of part of the fortress in Paxos. The Greek state accepted all the financial obligations towards the foreign governments, companies and individuals, honouring previous arrangements and agreements. This results in increasing the Ionian public debt. The Greek state even agrees to pay redundancy fees to all the British officials due to lose their position as a result of the Union. The unification takes place in September/ October 1864.

After its union with Greece under the rule of King George I, the whole local idiosyncrasy and character of Corfu city is being compromised; its cultural and intellectual wealth is now subject to the choices of the Centre.

5 LITERATURE TESTIMONIES THE TRANSFORMATION OF CITY OF CORFU PHYSIOGNOMY

Our first testimony is from Constantinos Theotokis, one of the major Greek novelists and intellectuals of this era (late 19th century). His novel "Slaves and their Chains" is considered the first social Greek novel. He was born and lived for great part of his life in Corfu during the time that the island was being incorporated in the mainland state of Greece. In his short stories one can find strong ideological messages as he is trying to interpret his time and the social landscape. In "Slaves and their Chains" we watch the effects that the new reality of the union has upon a family of Corfu aristocrats. In particular we note:

The bad financial condition of many aristocrats due to the end of their tax relief and their new tax obligations. Similarly the abolition of the use of serfs (like the Russian pre-revolutionary servants) and of the feudal previous system meant that they now had to pay wages to their working hands. The aristocrats who failed to respond to the new status quo were driven to bankruptcy and financial ruin.

The emergence of a new economic class of professionals (doctors and lawyers) together with the bankers and high-level officials of the new administration. The members of this new class seem to seek social recognition

through marriages with members of the old aristocracy. In addition, we see the appearance of the first industrialists who have close relationships with the new political landscape.

Throughout the book the decline of the old aristocratic mansions is presented through the description of the decay of their furnishings and decorations, and the disappearance of heirlooms, which are now sold out of financial necessity.

It is also evident the role that Corfu used to play in the past as a centre of international mobility from mainland Greece to Europe and as a place of refuge for Greek officials during the Ottoman occupation.

It is recorded the emergence of new suburbs like Yalos, as places of residence for the new influential economic classes. Those residences have elements lent by the old mansions but they also have modern (end of 19th century) European elements and facilities. (p. 83)

- Social events like ‘ball dances’ are used as the meeting places of the old and the new classes of Corfu. (p. 83)
- Corfu is also presented as place of migration for the Greeks that used to live in Europe and prefer to stay there in their return to Greece, due to its similarities with the other European cities. (p. 89)
- The new influential class is eager to raise its status in comparison to the old aristocrats through their participation in charitable activities and other opportunities they have to show their wealth. (p. 90)
- Young people who study in Europe – mainly England and Germany – return either as agents of new revolutionary social ideas or rationalised nationalistic dogmas.
- The social conventions of the past continue to repress the emotions of the new bourgeois. However, the first cracks appear and moral deviances are excused in exchange for money.
- In many places in the book, a nostalgia of the old rule is being expressed; the old aristocratic traditions and the metropolitan character of the city. For example, in the following extract, an old aristocrat reminisces during a social event: “Our city, so much admired by civilised nations ... our poor island ... the last fortress of culture. And none of you, the young people, does not care any more to preserve, not for our traditions and history, the glorious history of this glorious place, nobody wants to remember those glorious years, the great years of the Venice rule ...” (p. 116).
- Finally, in the book (p. 230), one can also find the emergence of the new social code and behaviour that characterises the new Greek state: acquisition of a place as a civil servant equates to social and financial stability. Those positions have now become an object of political influence and negotiation for every government.

A lot of evidence of the transformation of the city of Corfu and its society are also included in Theotokis’ extended short story “Honour and Money”. There we can note the following:

- The corruption of the civil servants who serve first the will of the government that has appointed them rather than the civil interest.
- The rise of smuggling as means of bypassing the heavy taxation imposed by the new Greek administration which has resulted in the increase of many product prices.
- We find there again evidence of the decline of many aristocrats and their need to achieve some connection with the new financially vigorous upper-middle class through influential marriages.
- Due to the decline of the aristocrats, we see the acquisition of the old aristocratic mansions by the new financially powerful bourgeois and high level civil servants arriving from mainland Greece.
- We also witness the first collisions of the political parties on a regional level and the marginalisation of the old aristocratic rule.
- We also witness the emergence of the new working class – and their habitat at the margins of the city – that is becoming increasingly self conscious and seems to overcome the social barriers of the past and demand a more central role in social activity.

Nicholas Conemenos is a Corfu-born intellectual who lived end of 19th and beginning of 20th century in the city of Corfu. In many of his texts that have the form of chronicles or short stories we are allowed glimpses of the changes in the city or the preservation of particular elements in its physiognomy. In particular in one of his texts he writes about the changes in the use of the Spaniada – the open space between the old Fortress and the city. He reminds us that in the year of the British “protection” the place did not have any cafes, apart from one or two workshops that produced sweets and liquors. He observes that in the years after the Union many cafes opened in the area that expanded their seating area outdoors, which slowly became a meeting point for Corfu citizens, similarly to an ancient Greek/Roman Agora. He then continues to the nostalgic description of buildings around the Spaniada area that do not exist any more. In addition Conemenos wrote a little chronicle around the demolition of Porta Reale to make way for a new road. The writer objects of the destruction because he believes that Porta Reale is a monument, an arch which “for one reason on another one finds in central roads in all the major European cities and where they are and are considered jewels of the place...”

The Athenian writer Michael Mitsakis visited Corfu city twice in 1894, when he stayed for a whole year, and at the end of 1896 – beginning of 1897. As a result he wrote five short stories with traveller’s impressions. In his texts we can note:

- The first impression of the city as his ship approaches the harbour and he gazes at the two Fortresses – the Old and the New.
- He is impressed by the varieties of the bourgeois block of flats of Corfu city, with their tall and narrow five or six storeys.
- He also notes the multiculturalism of the population of the city which includes Greeks, Italians and Jews.
- In his impressions from Corfu he lists the two palaces, of St George and St Michael, and of Mon Repos. The former is work of the British Captain and Civil Engineer Simon Whitmore. The front of this monumental complex of buildings is inspired by Palladian models with its Doric set of columns which is interrupted by the arches of St Michael and St George so that it can then be reunited at its ends around the north side of Spaniada, where it is located. Mitsakis acknowledges its past glory when it was constantly used by the British Commissioner at the beginning of the Ionian Polis and its current museum status as it is now only used once a year for the formal reception of King George of Greece on his annual visit to the island. For Mon Repos, Mitsakis informs us that is preferred by the King and it is often used as the accommodation for members of other European Royal families.
- Another of his texts is dedicated to the Prisons of Corfu city presenting their innovative building and operation. The Prison building of Corfu were erected during the period of the British rule on the island (first half of 19th century) according to the model of Panopticon Confinement Building, designed by the British politician Jeremy Bentham as part of the prison system reform. Bentham’s central idea was that the guard should be able to see at the same time all the prisoners’ cells. The particulars in the organisation of the prison buildings under his influence have been acclaimed as progressive for criminal reformation and surveillance by many philosophers like Michel Foucault. The Prisons of Corfu, in use till the present day, was built with some extensions to the central building a little later than the hey-day of Bentham’s progressive thinking but with evidence of his influence.
- Finally, another short text is dedicated to an “industrial pavilion” in the city, the Aspioti industry for the production of paper, where the writer observes the close links of the industrials with government, since the later has become its sole customer.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In previous papers we have proved that literature gains social visibility and presence in the world through its interrelation with politics, law, technology, language, education, property, individual’s creativity and many other cultural elements and thoughts around important human issues. In this way, literature is accepted in

those mechanisms and codes that transform simple acts in socially meaningful facts. We have also concluded that the narrative action we can identify the relationship of the writer with the space that he or she lives or chooses to inhabit as part of their world of the novel. In all the narrative actions the writer is being driven by their concepts, ideas and impressions which are directly or indirectly linked with their social and cultural background and position, and influence their choices – even when those choices are made unconsciously. As a result, in the novel we encounter the reflection of the social group that the writer belongs to and the social circumstances that they face while creating the novel. These elements can present us with some vivid images of the urban environment, seen through a series of prisms that add more interest, because they echo the ideologies and social situations that develop the appeal and physiognomy of a space⁵.

By applying these results in the case of city of Corfu, we have extracted interesting testimonies about the gradual transformation of the city from state capital to a provisional city.

As we have seen, the recently established state of Greece is struggling to establish a European character for itself, trying to adopt the characteristics of progress presented in a middle- European society, like for example, Belgium. Since most of the cities in the East, such as Thessaloniki, Ioannina, Smirni, Alexandria, even Corfu, and in particular Constantinople, were all far more advanced than the state's new capital Athens. So, many efforts were taken towards bringing Athens up to speed and making it a new national centre. Therefore, the Union with the Ionian islands and in particular with Corfu was subjected to this mentality. The city of Corfu was relieved of any cosmopolitan or metropolitan function and was demoted to the seat of regional administrator whose influence was limited to the island and the little islets of Paxos around it. The other Ionian islands were incorporated in different administrative regional offices. At the same time but in a slower pace, the laws and political ethos of mainland Greece started to have greater influence over the life of Corfu citizens though they were often in conflict with the principles that used to govern the society of Corfu in the past.

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⁵ JOSEPH STEFANOU & ATHANASSIOS BALERMPAS, The role of abstract (immaterial) values in projects of urban area regeneration: a case for literature, CORP 2006