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Contested Histories: Revisiting the Built Heritage of Children in Greece

An Interview with Kostas Tsiambaos, Coordinator of DOCOMOMO Greece

Children are not considered to be a minority group, despite their characterization as «minors» in the English language, a term that refers to an individual below the legal age for attaining the full exercise of his or her rights.[1] However, if the same criteria are applied to children as to other minority groups – such as prejudice, discrimination and disempowerment – children could in fact be perceived as an unacknowledged minority.[2] Children and their voices have been largely underrepresented within the scholarly discourse on heritage and even more so within preservation practice.[3] Aside from specific cases of school buildings, playgrounds, and orphanages that have attracted attention because of their architectural value – most notably the orphanage in Amsterdam by Aldo van Eyck – children's places remain at the margin of architectural research and heritage discourse.[4]

This notion of minority is the departure point in a conversation with Kostas Tsiambaos. Our discussion focuses on the representation of children and childhood in the treatment of built heritage in Greece, shedding light on how and why the built environment for children is valued or, in contrast, has been undervalued within the Greek national context. Particular attention is paid to postwar institutions for children, which, on the one hand, occupy a special place within collective memory and public discourse, but on the other hand, are nearly absent in heritage inventories and preservation processes. The Greek case of children's institutions includes children's towns (known in Greek as *paidopoleis*) and children's homes (youth centers) that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, during the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) and were initiated by the Greek Royal Welfare Fund. The first children's towns were a network of fifty-three makeshift child camps, while the postwar ones were newly built communities for children, including the work of established architects such as Emmanuel Vourekas and Doxiadis Associates.[5] The treatment of the children during, and after, the Greek Civil War – and, by extension, the built environment of these children's institutions – have been a controversial issue in modern Greek history associated not only with stories of family separation but also with the Civil War itself, national politics and the former Greek monarchy.[6] The size of this heritage, comprised of a dozen permanently built children's towns (fig. 1) and over two hundred children's homes (fig. 2), alongside an ongoing discourse around them, manifesting in autobiographies, testimonies and articles from the children themselves (now adults), call for a scientific discussion from the perspective of heritage studies.[7] This conversation, which was carried out on 12 October 2023 for *kritische berichte,* is a first attempt to revisit the built legacy of these contested children's places.

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1 United Photojournalists Agency Athens, 1967, photo, children's town in Ioannina, Greece

2 Royal Welfare Fund, 1962, photo, children's home in Nea Seleukia, Thesprotia, Greece

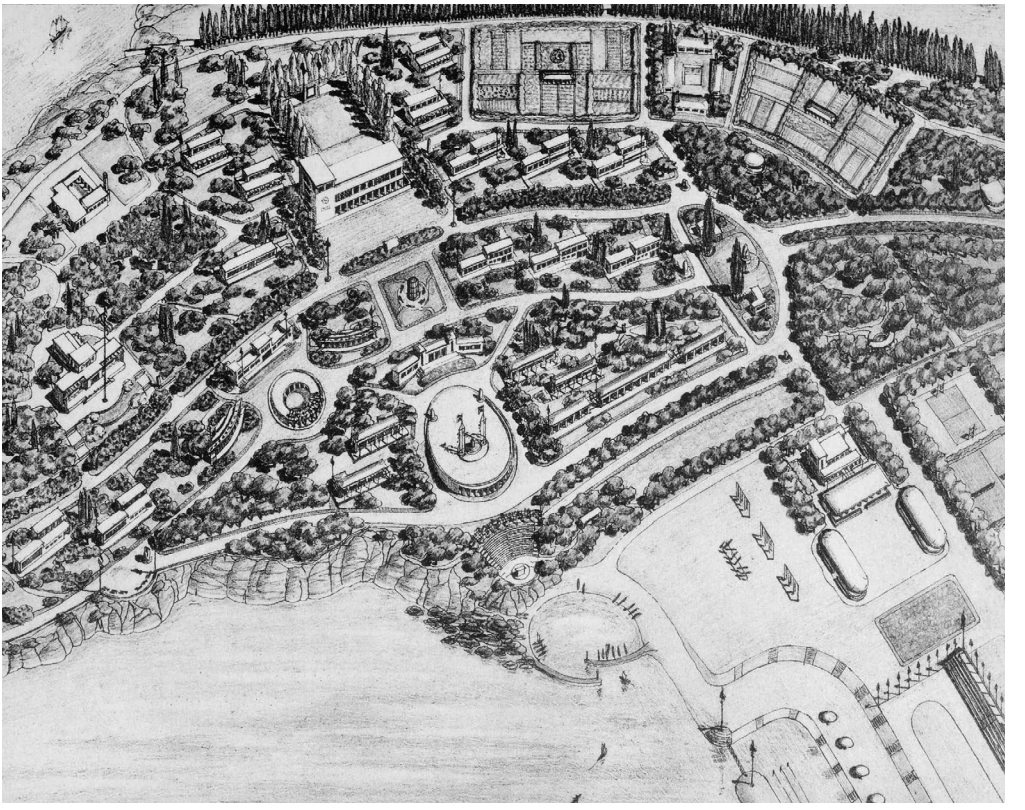
Maria Kouvari (MK): I would like to open our discussion with a wider question about the Greek experience of heritage identification, inventory, and the treatment of underrepresented groups within this context. What is the focus of Greek heritage inventories, and how are minorities represented or neglected within the heritage discourse here?
Kostas Tsiambaos (KT): The truth is that underrepresented groups are not exactly in the focus of Greek heritage inventories. However, there are a few exceptions. In the last ten to fifteen years there have been more efforts to rethink the groups, cultures and identities whose contribution to the Greek architecture and the built heritage was neglected. Female architects were the first group (if we consider them a group) whose work came under the light of recent exhibitions, online databases and publications. It was disappointing to see how late such a discussion developed but, still, its importance should not be underestimated. Moreover, research on disabled persons, like on the blind engineer Michalis Orros, resulted in a better visibility of minor, peripheral cases. Talking about children in particular, there are a few scholars who have focused their research, or part of it, on children and architecture. I am thinking of colleagues like Kyriaki Tsoukala, professor emerita at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, who provides an inspiring account of the child scale and the Greek city, and Garyfallia Katsavounidou, assistant professor at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, who approaches the subject of the child in relation to human-centered urbanism, children's play, and children's independent mobility. I am also glad to teach at a school whose students are very much interested in the relation of architecture to «marginalized» groups: children, elderly people, disabled persons, people with autism spectrum disorder, persons with end-stage diseases etc. Every year, a number of undergrad research projects and 5th-year diploma projects are dedicated to such topics. Usually, this starts with a student's personal experience of a «difficult» case (like a person in their family or friend circle) but not always. My impression is that students nowadays really want to move beyond the norm in order to feel more empathetic and engaged.

MK: Allow me now to shift our focus to the children's institutions, an overlooked part of built heritage in Greece, which we can also understand and problematize as the heritage of children as an unacknowledged minority. Children's institutions in Greece are part of its social history, but many of them, especially the built artifacts of postwar children's towns, children's homes and children's holiday camps remain unexplored and undocumented. How have formal heritage processes evaluated the significance of such places?
KT: The most meaningful studies on children's institutions in Greece were carried out by historians. Important contributions by scholars such as Tasoula Vervenioti, Loukianos Chasiotis, Riki Van Boeschoten and Loring M. Danforth cast light on the drama of these children by studying the children's institutions as parts of a broader postwar national and political discourse, often in comparison to similar institutions in other countries. Architects and architectural historians focus usually more on the buildings themselves as constructions, and less on the ideologies they represent. So, unless someone has a basic knowledge of what these artifacts contain or represent, what kind of silenced histories and untold memories are embedded in their rooms and walls, they cannot become aware of the historical context and their social significance. Fortunately, the history of a building or a site is always a decisive factor

with regard to their listing. And all listing guidelines and preservation charters that are implemented in the Greek legislation take this into account.

MK: Perhaps you could tell us a bit about how the history of these places has affected the memory discourse – how might intangible factors such as the post-war sociopolitical context and today's politics of memory have affected society's inertia towards the heritage of children?
KT: One thing that was not productive in the evaluation and protection of these places was their overdetermination, in political/ideological terms, either by the Greek left or the Greek right. Typically, such places were seen either as testament of a «dark» period of modern Greek history or as bearers of moral values and national ideals. The thing with architecture, or any other creative practice for that matter, is that beyond its ties to a specific political project, there is always a degree of autonomy. In other words, architecture can be good or bad, interesting or not, regardless of its ideological origins. This political overdetermination was something related to the postwar sociopolitical context, and the wounds of the Greek Civil War in particular, but also something that re-emerges every time the public political discourse becomes polarized (as it did between 2010 to 2015). Having said that, contemporary historical research in Greece is of a very high quality reflected in a boom of publications on postwar history, including architectural history, the interconnection of Greek research institutions with international academic networks, notably departments of Modern Greek Studies, as well as the hosting of venues, for example, the upcoming international conference of the European Architectural History Network that we will host at the School of Architecture (NTUA) in June 2024. This makes the reconsideration and evaluation of contested heritage, such as the national children's institutions are, better understood and more acceptable as parts of a public memory that repairs and restores, practically and metaphorically, more than it destroys or idealizes (idealization being another kind of denial of the historical truth in this case).

MK: How do the broader community and civil society engage both with the history and built legacy of such sites for children today?
KT: As I said before, contemporary historical research in Greece is rather advanced and public history is part of it. There are many actions and events addressed to the general public (publications, speeches, guided walks, tv shows, podcasts etc.) that aim to introduce or re-introduce particular histories, persons, sites, and other transhistorical themes. In most cases, critical edges are blunted, for obvious reasons, which is not always a bad thing. Of course, this is something that also depends on who the organizers of the event are; in some cases, groups that have a clear positioning in the political spectrum do not hesitate to revisit specific sites and revive their heritage as a form of activism and within a polemical context. Sites for children are rarely in the focus of such actions and the history of children, in general, is kind of absent from public events as those aforementioned. I would dare to say that ‹the child›, as a theme, is one of the difficult ones and whenever it appears in a discussion it rarely becomes the actual center of it. In other words, one could argue about children's institutions, children's camps and children's villages, etc. but never actually discuss children themselves. Sites for children are seen as substantiation of state policies, types of political power relations, mechanisms of discipline and control, etc. but



3 Panos N. Dzélépy, Villages d'Enfants de Voula, 1935–1937, Athens, Greece, axonometric plan, realized project, 273 × 233 mm

rarely as places that talk to us about the children and their experience. One could argue that this is because children did not document their experience, but my impression is that this absence is also an indication of research priorities. You cannot find answers to questions you never ask.

MK: What is the fate of other children's environments of the interwar years that have been listed, e.g., the renowned children's colony in Voula near Athens of the Patriotic Foundation for Child Protection by the architect Panos Nikolis Dzélépy in the early 1930s?

KT: There is no doubt that Dzélépy's children's village in Voula is one of the masterpieces of modern Greek architecture (fig. 3). Unfortunately, the current condition of this amazing modern complex is disappointing, despite the fact that most of its thirty buildings are protected by law since 1988 as «important historical monuments in need of state protection». Today, five of the buildings are demolished (fig. 4) and only twelve out of twenty-five buildings are in use by what is now a public rehabilitation center for children with disabilities. Some of those buildings were renovated in 2018 but without any effort to restore their original form. This is one of the many examples of modern complexes, which are protected by law, but not secured in practice; this is also an example of how architectural masterpieces are often left unattended to gradually degrade without any real support by the state or

4 Panos N. Dzélépy, Villages d'Enfants de Voula, 1935–1937, Athens, Greece, photo, refectory

the citizens or the architectural community. It is surprising that not many architects know about the existence of such a unique modern complex in the Southern suburbs of the Greek capital, not even professors in Schools of Architecture. And I am afraid that because of the extreme market pressures by the touristic real estate in the so-called Athenian Riviera, and besides its listed status, the complex will continue to be under threat. Fortunately, there has been a kind of activity around the specific complex since 2020 or so, from architects and professors in architecture schools to civil servants working in the municipality to which the site belongs and citizens that care for their city, a demand for action and public recognition of the complex's value.

MK: What are the theoretical and practical challenges of evaluating, preserving, and reusing these heritage places associated with children in Greece?
KT: As it is usually the case with heritage, its protection or not is a matter of priorities. The evaluation of heritage is maybe the easiest part: higher consulting and decisive bodies like the Central Council for Modern Monuments examine many cases each year and decide which are important enough to be listed. The body also intervenes whenever an important modern building or site is under threat and they even suggest good practices when an existing modern monument is reconstructed and reused. Moreover, there are many good colleagues, even students in architectural

heritage and preservation postgrad programs, absolutely capable of documenting historically and technically even the most difficult case, suggesting restoration strategies and techniques, and providing an up-to-date, sustainable agenda of protection. The difficult part is when specific protective measures must be taken. Because, as it is the case with the Voula children's village, the listing of a building does not secure its restoration, not even its survival. This is where the state (central government, municipalities etc.) need to decide what they really want to protect. Of course, using or re-using these places is crucial for their survival. The fact that Dzélépy's children's village at Penteli is in continuous use since the 1930s explains its excellent condition, despite its various small-scale modifications.

MK: Beyond the contested narratives around these children's institutions, how can their built artifacts and sites be understood and reevaluated today?
KT: I think that all these buildings and sites should be integrated into a network. By this, I have in mind a strategic plan to gradually form a kind of archive of built artifacts that extends from the actual building to its scientific documentation, its public impact, and even its presence in the social media. Today, that we have all the necessary tools to link the actual with the virtual, we should go beyond the survey, the technical restoration and the listing; we need to make these artifacts ‹present› in the city and accessible to its citizens in a way that they become parts of everyday culture. To give an example: this was something that was done with the Athenian *polykatoikia*. This modern type of apartment building that was undervalued, if not ostracized, for decades is now a cult symbol of Athens; this re-evaluation of the *polykatoikia* was not only the result of our efforts to cast aside the misconceptions around this type of building but also due to the increasingly positive presence of the building as an icon in the public discourse and the mass media.

MK: How has DOCOMOMO Greece impacted the way that these places, and in general «minority» places of all kinds, have been understood and used?
KT: Before making a distinction between «minority» and «majority» places I would suggest we consider as «minority» all modern heritage which is under threat, in the sense that its «voice» in the public realm is too weak to be heard. In my opinion, this is an important first step towards an understanding of what is in need and what is not, what is liminal and fragile, what asks for our care and support, what demands for an urgent action by us, etc. DOCOMOMO Greece is one of the oldest national teams of DOCOMOMO international and since 1990 we have launched many actions, events, conferences, publications etc. in support of our modern heritage. Our main role is that of a body that documents modern buildings and sites; but we also intervene whenever something we consider as important faces a specific danger. In our conferences and publications we usually follow a thematic approach and this gives us the opportunity to be open and inclusive, and able to discuss «minority» places and underrepresented groups of all kinds (related to children, to refugees, to those suffering for various reasons). Having said that, I have no doubt that we need to consider inclusiveness as something more targeted and programmatic. We need to consciously address issues of «minorities» in relation to architecture in an almost activist way that redirects our actions towards places we usually ignore. At the end, all these buildings and sites of the modern heritage are like our «children», even if most of them existed before us and will probably outlive us. It is our duty to perform

as «parents» towards these creations of our modern culture, to show responsibility and concern, and protect them for the next generations as living evidence of what our best intentions once were able to construct.

MK: Thank you very much for this illuminating insight into the Greek heritage discourse. I hope that our discussion will stimulate further research on «minor» objects and agents.

Notes

1 For a definition of a minor in terms of humanitarian law, see Doctors without Borders: The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law, 2023, https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/index/, last accessed on 25.09.2023.

2 Yvonne Vissing: Are Children a Minority Group?, in: Yvonne Vissing: Children's Human Rights in the USA. Clinical Sociology: Research and Practice, Center for Childhood & Youth Studies, Springer, 2023, p. 271–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30848-2_11, last accessed on 25.09.2023.

3 Kate Darian-Smith/Carla Pascoe: Mapping the Field, in: Kate Darian-Smith/Carla Pascoe (eds.), Children, Childhood, and Cultural Heritage, London 2013, p. 1–17.

4 An exception is the account of the heritage of orphanages and children's homes within the Australian national context provided by Australia ICOMOS in a special issue of the journal Historic Environment, Places of Trauma and Healing, vol. 32, no. 2, January 2020. To quote just a selection from the extensive literature cf. Francis Strauven: Aldo Van Eyck's Orphanage. A Modern Monument, Rotterdam 1996; Aldo Eyck et al.: Aldo van Eyck – Orphanage Amsterdam: Building and Playgrounds, Amsterdam 2018; Aldo van Eyck/Francis Strauven/Vincent Ligtelijn: The Child, the City, and the Artist: an Essay on Architecture: the In-Between Realm, Amsterdam 2008 (1962).

5 Maro Kardamitsi-Adami: Educational Buildings, in: Maro Kardamitsi-Adami: The World of Emmanuel Vourekas, Athens 2012 (Melissa Publishing House), p. 146–149; Doxiadis Associates: Children's Town in Ioannina, in: DA Newsletter, No. 69, August 1964.

6 Loring M. Danforth/Riki Van Boeschoten: The Paidopoleis of Queen Frederica, in: Loring M. Danforth/Riki Van Boeschoten: Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory, Chicago 2012 (Chicago University Press), p. 85–111.

7 Royal Welfare Fund: Royal Welfare Fund and Its Work, Pamphlet, National Library of Greece, Athens (in Greek).

Image Credits

1 United Photojournalists Agency Athens, Album with Photos, 1967, Former Archive of National Welfare Organization, Athens, Greece

2 Royal Welfare Fund, Ta Ktíria Tis Vasilikís Prónias 1950–1961, 1962, photo, p. 56

3, 4 Panos N. Dzélépy: Villages d'Enfants, L'Architecture Vivante en Grèce, Paris 1948 (Albert Morancé), p. 27, 37