Society, Culture and Spatial Organization: An Athens Community

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The area of study, Germanika — a refugee community in Piraeus — has certain specific characteristics. Housing is of a standard size and pattern, it has been occupied for over 40 years (giving sufficient time for changes in family structure), and households have limited resources (which allowed observation of the immediate priorities in spatial organization).

The disastrous Asia Minor campaign of 1920-1922 and the defeat of the Greek Army resulted in the arrival of a flood of destitute Greeks, amounting in total to 1,500,000 persons. By 1929 the Greek Government and the Refugee Commission had provided 27,000 houses in 125 urban refugee quarters. One such quarter is the area known today as Germanika which was established in 1927.

The area of Germanika, approximately 80,000 sq.m., was divided into 32 blocks. The size of each block was approximately 50 meters by 35 meters (Fig. 1). They were separated one from another by open strips of 10 meters width, forming the basic street pattern.

In each block 10 double-unit structures were erected (see Fig. 2) the area of each unit being around 33.5 sq.m. Each consisted of 2 rooms (named by us A and B), a kitchen (K) and, behind this, a toilet. No bathroom was provided. Entrances to all but room B were from the outside, with additional internal connections between the kitchen and rooms A and B. Each unit was provided with a courtyard and a side-yard.

The structures were wooden frame prefabs with panel walls 2 inches thick (including a cavity). The false wooden ceiling at 3.3 m. height was covered by a tiled pitched roof.

Ownership

Only 93 of these 552 units have been rebuilt in the 43 years since 1927, mainly because of the difficulties of establishing ownership and raising the necessary finances. Full legal ownership titles are a precondition for permits to rebuild. This can, in principle, be obtained by a nominal payment: four thousand drachmas was the figure mentioned in several cases. In cases of co-ownership the law allows rebuilding, provided all parties agree and obtain titles accordingly. It must be noted that co-occupancy is defined by law when the sharing families have different surnames. Thus, the most common patterns in Germanika of parents sharing a unit with married daughters, or a unit shared between married sisters, fall into this category.

Lack of agreement between sharing families appears to be a major barrier to full legal settlement regarding ownership, and has inhibited rebuilding. Eleven of the thirty units in our sample are occupied with full ownership rights. Only three of these are shared units and in each case the sharing of the unit was subsequent to the purchase of full titles. Seventeen of the 30 units are occupied by concession rights only, while the remaining two units of our sample are rented.

Relationships

Thirty-seven households (87% of the 42 households in the sample) are still occupied by the original family, and in 13 of these, the original occupant (i.e. a person over 60, resident since 1927-8) is still present.

Marriage by arrangement is the prevailing form. Even when the couple have met independently (an increasing trend), marriage negotiations are usually conducted in the customary manner. This group cohesiveness is maintained, and marriages continue to be more likely to occur among persons already known to the relatives or to marriage-brokers.
Fig. 1: Layout of Germanika, 1927. Households are referenced by block number and unit number (see Block 5).
A case study is presented to illustrate the complex network of relationships which have grown up in one part of the area.

Within a few minutes from each other — a distance of 1½ blocks — are seven units related by a complex of ties (Fig. 3). The relationships diagrammed are of three kinds: blood ties, marriage or affinal ties ("in-laws") and friendship. A fourth factor in producing this network, not illustrated for simplicity's sake, is occupation: three households had contracted arranged marriages resulting from the work-contacts of the girl's brother and her present husband.

Households 1 and 4 are related by a blood tie between brother and sister. The husband, Mr. E, of Household 1, has a sister in Household 4. Consequently also the sister's son's wife in Household 4A is affinally related to Household 1.

Households 1 and 2 are related by a mother-son tie. Mrs. E's son set up Household 2 on his marriage to the sister of Mr. F (Household 3) establishing an affinal relationship there. Thus, Mrs. F is affinally related to Mrs. E ("Sympheteri" or "in-laws") and by extension, so is Household 3A (Mrs. F's niece and husband).

A double tie thus exists between Household 2 and 3, viz. Mrs. E's son's marriage to Mr. F's sister, an affinal tie, and the blood tie between Mr. F and his sister (married in Household 2).

Friendship between Mrs. E (Household 1) and two sisters, Mrs. G (Household 6) and Mrs. J (Household 5) links another kinship network with the one described above.

The daughter of Mrs. J (Household 5) married the son of Mrs. B (Household 7), their home being Household 5A. Thus, affinal and blood ties link Household 7 (and, by extension 7A: Mrs. B's son), and Household 5 and 5A.
As already mentioned, Mrs. G and Mrs. J are sisters, and each share the unit with married daughters (Households 5A and 6A). Blood ties of sisterhood and those of maternal aunt to niece exist between these two units.

By extension, Mrs. J (Household 6) is affinally related to Mrs. B (Household 7), as Mrs. J’s niece (5A) is married to Mrs. B’s son.

This complex situation is not unique. Other examples of interrelated families within the small area covered by this study can be given. It is clear, therefore, that residential proximity over a long time span, combined with other factors, has created a tightly woven fabric of relationships in the area. These in turn act continuously to perpetuate the homogeneity of the group.

Family Structure and Spatial Changes

Two case histories are given here to show how the changing composition of the family through various phases of its development cycle is reflected in the sequence of changes and additions to built-up space (all of which are technically illegal).

The unit 16/19 was occupied by a couple and their three children in 1927. Subsequently three more children were born to them: a total of three girls and three boys. The unit was then occupied by 8 persons. The children slept in two beds, three per bed, for several years.

The oldest girl, Mrs. L, (No. 3 Fig. 4) married over 30 years ago taking as her dowry Room A (Fig. 5). Her husband excavated below the room to make a kitchen. They had only one daughter. The sons, (6,7,8) left the unit on marriage, one by one. The second daughter (4) married and took Room B as her dowry home. Shortly after, the mother of the family died (1). The composition of the unit then consisted of two married sisters (3, 4) and their children (one daughter each), the youngest sister (5) and the father (2).

About 15 years ago two new rooms were added in the courtyard. This was the dowry of the youngest girl, Mrs. K (5). During the interval, Mrs. L’s daughter (9) had grown up, and on marriage was given Room A. Her parents then moved into the front basement, and a separate kitchen alcove area was excavated under the street pavement.

The second sister’s daughter married and moved out with her husband. The unit at this time held four households: Mrs. L and husband in the front basement; her married daughter and two grandchildren in Room A; the second sister and husband in Room B; and Mrs. K with her husband and aged father in the courtyard rooms. There were eleven persons in the unit and four generations of the family. They shared a toilet, but each household had separate kitchen facilities.

Over the past three years there has been a decrease in the number of occupants. The father and second sister died within one year, and this sister’s husband moved out. A year ago, Mr. L’s daughter’s family left Athens for a better job opportunity, and Mrs. L took in her deceased husband’s brother to live in the front basement. There are now four new persons in the unit. The second sister’s rooms have not yet been taken over by the two remaining sisters.
Over the 42 years there has been a total increase in built-up space of 52 sq.m., i.e. a factor of 160%. Of the original open space of 62 sq.m. only 25 sq.m. remains, i.e. a decrease of nearly 50%. The dowry of Mrs. K consisted of two rooms in the courtyard with a total area of 37 sq.m. The basement-room was originally built as a kitchen but became a living space on the marriage of their daughter. Its present area is 11 sq.m. Adjacent to this is the kitchen alcove of 1.5 sq.m., created subsequently.

The creation of additional built-up space resulted mainly from the need to provide rooms as dowry portions. This also required separate kitchen areas, a facility given priority in every household. However no change was made to the single toilet, whose position as a shared facility is a pivot which affects the layout of all new additions to the original structure.

A second example further illustrates the interplay of family life and the organization of space (Fig. 6).

Mrs. R and Mrs. C are two sisters, each occupying with their families the back portion of unit 16/19. Mrs. R was given Room B as her dowry portion. The corresponding basement room was added as her family increased in size. Mrs. C has two rooms in the courtyard and a new kitchen as a dowry from
their mother, the original occupant. Their mother’s youngest sister, Mrs. M, lived and brought up her family in Room A and its basement.

Mrs. R, given Room B, subsequently had 6 children, and Mrs. C, given the courtyard rooms, had 5. A few years ago, the unit also contained their widowed mother and a younger daughter, who have since moved out. At present there are 13 people. All share the single toilet, which has undergone no change in the 40 years of occupancy.

Built-up space has increased by 47 sq.m., a factor of 152%. This includes the front basement of Mrs. M, 8 sq.m., the back basement of Mrs. R, 12 sq.m., and the two rooms and kitchen of Mrs. C of 24 sq.m. Furthermore, kitchen facilities were created for each household. Mrs. M and Mrs. R cook in their respective basements which are also sleeping spaces.

**Characteristic Features of the Family Pattern**

(A) A tendency for the co-residence of female kin in one unit.

The continuity of links in the matriline results from the interplay of two factors: (1) the system of dowry provision, and its specific form: viz. a shelter provided...
for the new wife; (2) limited economic resources which have prevented the purchase of land elsewhere and the construction of new homes. The necessary provisions had to be made within the family plot.

(B) The existence of three or even four generations of a family in the same unit.

Although our differentiation of households distinguishes the old couples from the younger family, the co-resident group actually consists of several generations.

(C) A tendency for unmarried adult sons to remain in the parental home (which in time may become the married sister’s home). Seven of the 42 households in our sample include an unmarried male member, over 40 years old and economically self-sufficient: in one case the son earns about 6,000 drachmas per month. The only single male family members who were not resident in the unit were seamen, and they invariably returned to spend their leave in their parent’s home. This custom increases the pressure on built-up space, particularly as it is combined with the notion of bedroom-privacy, an ideal not often attained in the Germanika houses.

Changes in Spatial Organization

The effect of these societal characteristics on spatial organization operates in two ways:

(1) Changes in function of original spaces

(2) Creation of additional spaces

In the original units a living room and a bedroom were provided (Room A & B) a smaller room for the kitchen, and a toilet. It was observed that the functions of Rooms A and B have in no case changed entirely, but in all cases they have now become dual purpose, i.e. sleeping and living rooms. The priority on bedroom space is shown in the consistent conversion of the original kitchen. In 70% of the households it is now used as a bedroom, and in all but one case it serves this purpose only. Clearly, therefore, there has been a need to create new kitchen spaces.

Kitchens: These are usually of small proportions and are provided either in the basement or in the courtyard, or (in two cases) under the street. A distinctive feature which emerged is that every household has its own separate kitchen. 38% of the kitchens have an average area of 2 sq. meters, four are 1.5 sq. meters and 2 have an area of only 1 sq. metre. The smallness of all kitchens results in the placement of kitchen appliances (such as refrigerators) in other rooms. (It is very usual for a large refrigerator to form part of the furniture of the living-room-bedroom).

It appears that the kitchen is seen primarily as a cooking area, and cooking activities are not conceived as communal. Thus a kitchen, even though of minimal size, is the independent realm of each married woman. Fig. 7 shows a somewhat extreme case where the single original unit is now occupied by five households, each with its own separate kitchen area.

Kitchens in Germanika are not used as a focus for family activity (such as is common in various parts of the world) and the concept of «the hearth» as a gathering place appears to be absent; a reflection, perhaps, of the general outdoor orientation characterizing so much of Greek life.

Basement: The creation of additional space was greatly facilitated by the possibility of excavating beneath the prefab structure and creating basement rooms. The wooden frame prefab houses needed no plinth or foundation below the structure. By excavating beneath Room A or B, or both, no walls need be erected and the ceiling was already provided. The ease and relative cheapness of this action made this the first solution, and new rooms have only relatively recently been built in the courtyard (the earliest known 20 years ago: most in the last 10 years).

Basements have been created in over three-quarters of the units studied. Their average area is 12.5 sq. meters, and their height (slightly over 2 metres) is lower than the normal provision. All the basements have problems of ventilation, dampness and lighting, but they have become an integral part of the housing-pattern of the area; a direct response to the pressures on space and the priorities as conceived by the inhabitants.

Toilet: The single constant feature over the 40 years is the toilet. In our sample only 3 households have built their own toilet to avoid sharing with another, and only eleven households do not share their toilet. Thirty-one households (over 70%) share toilet facilities. The average number of persons per toilet is 9. In two cases there is a maximum figure of 18, in six other cases more than 10 persons.

Changes in Area: In sum, the sequence of creating additional built-up space in the households studied may be expressed as follows: The original area of built-up space, now occupied by our 42 households, totalled 634.5 sq. meters (Table 1). Additions total another 743.5 sq. meters, an increase of 117% and the basement area added is 40% of this additional built-up space (342 sq. m.). These figures clearly illustrate the demands for living space over 40 years, and the importance of the basement areas. Originally a total of 1,128 sq. meters of open space was provided per dwelling unit. This is now 725 sq. meters — a decrease of 44%. However, in terms of the average per household, there has been a decrease to a present average of 17 sq. meters.

This great decrease in open space has created problems which revolve around the necessity for drying space for clothes, as washing is done by handin every household. This gives rise to tensions and conflicts in many shared units, and clothes are often hung out along the streets.
Fig. 7: The importance of the separate kitchen space. Five households share one unit (196) each with its own kitchen.

Table 1.
CHANGES IN AREA: BUILT-UP & OPEN SPACE (in sq.m.)

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The Dowry

The two concepts particular to the culture of our group that have a direct effect on the organization of their household living space have already been mentioned more than once:
(1) The importance of the marriage dowry and its specific prescribed form
(2) The concept of a kitchen as the personal domain of each housewife and as primarily a cooking area.

The first needs rather more elaboration.

Dowry provision is common to all parts of Greece and usually consists of land as well as moveable property (furnishing, linen, etc.). Dowry provision is held as a necessary concomitant of marriage. When girls marry without a dowry, the parents may feel relief, but not necessarily pride. They have not fulfilled their expected obligations as parents. This attitude continues, regardless of the heavy burdens it places on a family particularly where there are only daughters, for in many cases sons help to provide their sister’s dowries.

In Germanika the dowry takes the form of the provision of a home for the married daughters, a widespread and central feature of the culture. This factor, together with limited economic resources, accounts for the two most characteristic aspects of the social structure of the units: the concentration of married female kin (mothers, sisters, maternal aunts), and a domestic group of several generations’ depth. It further explains the prevalence of the process of unofficial parcelling out of the shared units and the difficulties in obtaining full legal ownership titles.

As our examples have shown, dowry residence takes one of two forms:
(1) New concrete rooms in the courtyard of the unit (in most cases the residence of the youngest daughters, as such rooms were added only recently)
(2) The original rooms of the prefab are given to the newly married couple, while the parents move into the basement.

The latter is a constant pattern: in all units where aged parents co-reside with their married daughters (in a few cases married sons), the parents occupy basement rooms and the young couple the original rooms.

This suggests a general principle whereby the seniority due to age is subordinated to the imperatives of dowry provision for the marriage of daughters. Clearly, this is not a universal principle, but a culturally specific one. Age-seniority is a basic value in many societies, and priority is given accordingly. Conditions of life in the basement do not accord with those weaknesses and ills which often accompanied old age in our group. A typical example is quoted to illustrate the acceptance of this principle despite adverse conditions.

A two-roomed basement is occupied by Mrs. M and her husband, both about 65 years old, and their unmarried son of 40. The rooms are badly lit; damp penetrates the back walls and the strainway entrances are steep and narrow. The unit and courtyard have not otherwise been modified. Mrs. M’s daughter was given the original unit as her dowry, but for several years she and her family have not been living there. With her husband, a pastry maker, and two children, she moved to Athens, though they sometimes spend weekends in their Germanika home. The whole of the original unit — Rooms A, B, and K, — are otherwise kept closed. These rooms are not available for the use of her parents, despite the fact that Mrs. M suffers from rheumatism and gout. However, Mrs. M made no complaint against her daughter, nor about the fact that at her age she has to suffer such trying living conditions while the house is standing empty.

Concluding Remarks

The interplay of space and of social and cultural forces under limiting conditions in a Greek setting have been described in this report, and attempts made to indicate the significance of these characteristics.

Our endeavour throughout this investigation has been to show the operation of specific cultural norms upon the shaping of habitable space.

It is an empirical study, data being gathered by first hand observation. The general principles defining the culture of the group were gradually uncovered and interpreted in their own terms. The apparent «irrationalities» of different cultures are relative. The internal logic of a group’s life style can only be understood by dealing with the inherent symbolic content with which objects, actions and behavior patterns are invested.

We believe the study brings out the need for planners and designers of low cost mass housing to be much more aware of the cultural background and the value-system of the future inhabitants of their schemes, or these are unlikely to be successful in terms of the planners’ goals and the inhabitants’ aspirations.