

# REFLECTION PAPER

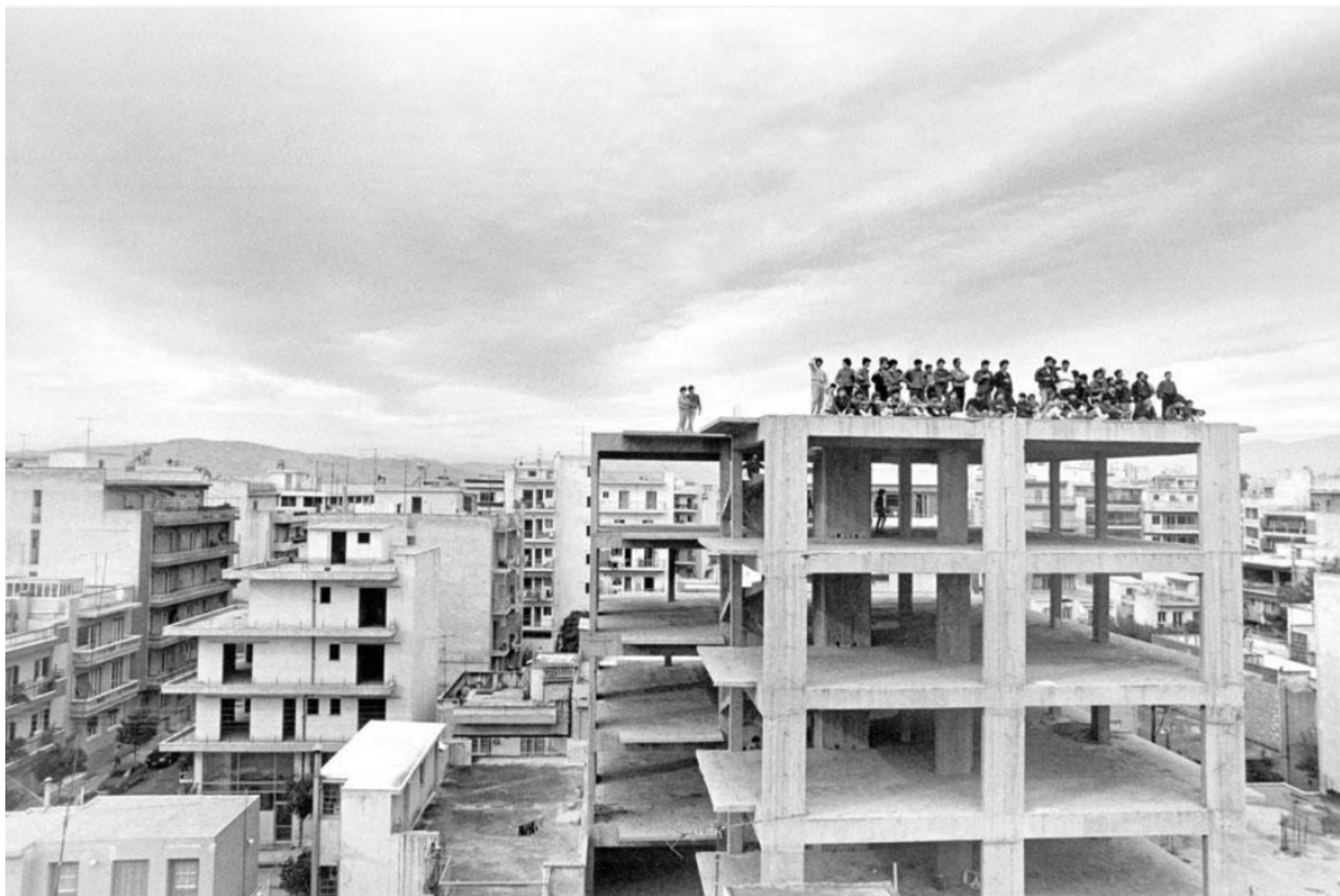
Papaoikonomou Zoe

POLYKATOIKIA<sup>1</sup> tapestry of shared ownership.

The reinterpretation of the Athenian Polykatoikia

1. The term Polykatoikia (πολυκατοικία) /po.li.ka.ti'ci.a/ is a composite word, from (Πολυ) poly, translated as multi, and the noun (Κατοικία) katoikia, dwelling.

Interior  
Buildings  
Cities



Manolis Baboussis, *Kalitheia*, 1986 silver print, 26 cm x 40 cm,  
Courtesy of the artist, and Ileana Tounta, Contemporary Art  
Center, Athens

Msc3/4 Independent Group  
13 December  
P4

## INTRODUCTION

This project was inspired by my experiences living in European cities, which brought to my attention the unique characteristics of Greek cities and their Polykatoikia buildings. When I left Greece, I still remember my first impression of other European cities, "Where are all your Polykatoikia buildings?"

This paper aims to design a new Polykatoikia model that revisits the relation between privacy and collectivity, setting social cooperation in the center. Inspired by contemporary practice, as well as the historical legacy of the Athenian Polykatoikia, this architectural design proposes an approach to revitalizing a sense of community while retaining essential common spaces (balconies, and terraces) in a more sustainable way.

It begins with the necessity of redefining life in the city, recovering the relation of the residents with their space, and underlining the possibilities of collective managing lost during the decades of individualism.

It is a design based on the logic of the Domino system, offering a functional and flexible reinforced concrete framework that adapts to the needs of the residents and the urban landscape. But the real meaning lies in the combination of this lean, functional framework with the small community mentality that the city's first inhabitants brought from the countryside.

The area of Exarchia is the ideal setting for carrying out this idea. It is a place of great social diversity, with a rich cultural heritage, a rebellious spirit, and strong protesting; all these features signal citizens' worries that the city is not in their hands and they need to claim it.

It is not just an architectural solution but a statement of how the urban environment may be reshaped through sharing, sustainable use of resources, and regeneration in the relationship between user and space. It is to attain a new Polykatoikia acting like a miniature of the city: space for interaction, coexistence, and community life.

## INTERIOR NEIGHBORHOOD

Athens, as a city with a long history and very different architectural heritage, opposes contemporary architectural design with particular difficulty. Polykatoikia, as a dominant form of housing, is a characteristic element in the urban landscape of the city, combining tradition with modernity. In this direction, the area of Exarchia is a vital example of this dynamic, where the architecture of the apartment building meets the cultural and social diversity of the neighborhood.

The Exarchia neighborhood stands out as something more than one of the oldest, aesthetically rich middle-class areas of Athens with particular cultural and political significance. Besides the architectural wealth of the area, Exarchia is characterized as something more than an authentic, vibrant, and rebellious probabilistically but also unjustly enough as "unreachable" and a "Gallic village". It's a crossroads of different streams of ideas, open to all political stances, radical and liberal, yet with a strongly developing sense of collectivity and solidarity. Cultural and educational characteristics make up major features of Exarchia: the Archaeological Museum, the Law School, and Polytechnic School, for example. But full of contradictions, Molotov cocktails in the trash bins remind the visitor how near the flashpoints are.

Ultimately, this project could land on many sites, however, I choose Exarchia because it seems to offer profitable ground for the application of a radical housing model for the Greek data, which could have a substantial impact on the Athenian city.

## THE SPECIFICITY AS A TYPE

The Polykatoikia is a particular architectural and urban typology that defines the modern Greek

cityscape, especially in the city of Athens. It emerged during the rapid urbanization of the mid-20th century, characterized by its adaptability, modularity, and layering of private and collective spaces.

Its specificity lies in the versatile framework: a reinforced concrete structure, the so-called Domino system, which allows flexible configurations for both residential and commercial purposes. The polykatoikia integrates key communal elements such as balconies, stairwells, and rooftops, fostering a subtle sense of shared urban life while giving priority to individual ownership.

This type has also absorbed social and cultural features, combining the rural mentality of neighborly interaction with dense urban living. Its ability to balance functionality, density, and affordability has made it an emblematic yet complex component of Greek urbanism.

## **THE NEW POLYKATOIKIA MANIFESTO**

I'm interested in the specificity of Polykatoikia as a Type.

In my practical architectural process I have identified specific architectural elements that I find particularly attractive and adaptable to new, more collective uses including the Polykatoikia entrance, the foyer, stairwells, corridors, balconies, rooftops, the ground floor, and inner courtyards. During the project, specific actions were taken to achieve the New Polykatoikia. These actions are related to the architectural, social and urban Terms that I set at the level of three scales: the scale of the city, the neighborhood and the building.

These terms shape the architectural manifesto of the new Polykatoikia:

1. High-quality communal spaces (balconies, rooftops, foyers, stairwells).
2. Collective decision making.
3. Shared amenities like kitchens, workspaces, or recreational areas.
4. Spaces that they can generate income
5. Flexibility of the use and layout of the apartment.
6. Spaces blending private and communal uses.
7. Sustainable energy systems and eco-friendly materials such as use of renewable energy sources, and energy efficient systems
8. Design minimizing environmental impact.
9. Open ground floor with commercial uses (pilotis) for public interaction.
10. Integration with courtyards and streets to activate the urban block.
11. Regular upkeep of shared areas through collective responsibility.
12. Adaptability to future societal and community changes.
13. Fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose.
14. Encouraging solidarity and social interaction.

The aim of this project was to conceptualize a cooperative housing model that redefines spatial priorities by minimizing private areas and expanding the generosity of collective spaces within the building. I iteratively experimented with different configurations to set up a layout that aligns with the principles outlined in the manifesto. The result is a prototype, a foundational design intended as a replicable model for future applications. My approach is one version that represents one possible realization of the envisioned "new Polykatoikia," embracing the core values of shared living and urban connectivity.

Having established the manifesto as a flexible framework of adaptable principles, I now present one specific version, a realization of the prototype into an architectural design. It is rooted in the general rules of the system but includes my interpretation and unique elements; showing how the broader vision can be demonstrated in a tangible, context-specific building.

## **CHALLENGES**

Such realization of a new collaborative Polykatoikia highlights two critical challenges that frame design. The deep-seatedness of individualism, rooted in ownership, requires some difficult shifts for new modes of collective living. By contrast, the active contribution from the residents themselves, adaptation to their diversity, stresses that community is a necessary anchor within which a fundamental element of the design takes place.

In the same vein, architectural design has to balance the creation of shared spaces with the maintenance of privacy, while the integration of the building into the densely inhabited landscape of Exarchia needs to respect the cultural and social identity of the area. Securing financing and navigating the legal boundaries of the traditional ownership framework highlight the need for practical solutions that combine vision and realism. These challenges do not simply act as obstacles but as guidelines, highlighting ways to reshape the concept of collective habitation and propose a new model of living in urban space.

## **THE BIG PICTURE IN THE MINIMUM SCALE**

The polykatoikia is an architectural typology and a social construct that epitomizes the layered complexities of urban living in Greece. Its evolution reflects the interplay of individual aspirations and collective needs, rural nostalgia and urban modernity, economic pragmatism and cultural identity. As a model, it offers valuable lessons in adaptability, efficiency, and the potential for shared experiences within dense cityscapes.

Yet its legacy also reveals critical challenges: fragmented ownership, a decline in communal care, and the tension between private interests and collective well-being. The polykatoikia can be reimagined through a contemporary lens into a living system of collaboration and deeper connections to the city.

In embracing this vision, we not only preserve an architectural archetype but also reinvigorate its potential for creating meaningful, sustainable urban habitats that honor both individuality and community. The new polykatoikia is no longer a building; it's a manifesto toward inclusiveness for a resilient urban future.

## **WHAT IS THE RELATION BETWEEN YOUR GRADUATION (PROJECT) TOPIC, THE STUDIO TOPIC (IF APPLICABLE), YOUR MASTER TRACK (A,U,BT,LA,MBE), AND YOUR MASTER PROGRAMME (MSC AUBS)?**

My graduation project focuses on designing a new Polykatoikia, exploring key interior spaces to foster communal living and tenant interaction. This directly aligns with the principles and themes

of the Architecture and Urbanism (A,U) track in my MSc AUBS (Architecture, Urbanism, and Building Sciences) master's program.

During my studies in the Netherlands, I had the opportunity to test myself with different data from those of Greek cities, which have a very specific profile. In the project I am studying, I analyze exactly the rigid architecture of the Greek city-center, which with all its urban and architectural qualities can be exemplified in points from European and by extension Dutch standards. Proposing collective spaces in a par excellence individualistic all-inclusive housing model, I strongly resist the reproduction of the ownership regime. It is also a personal challenge to propose contradictory elements in the Greek city.

The project addresses urban and architectural design challenges by integrating social and spatial dynamics, which is a core objective of the A,U track. By emphasizing communal living, shared spaces, and the social identity of urban areas, the project reflects the broader goals of creating innovative, sustainable, and socially cohesive urban environments that are central to the master's program.

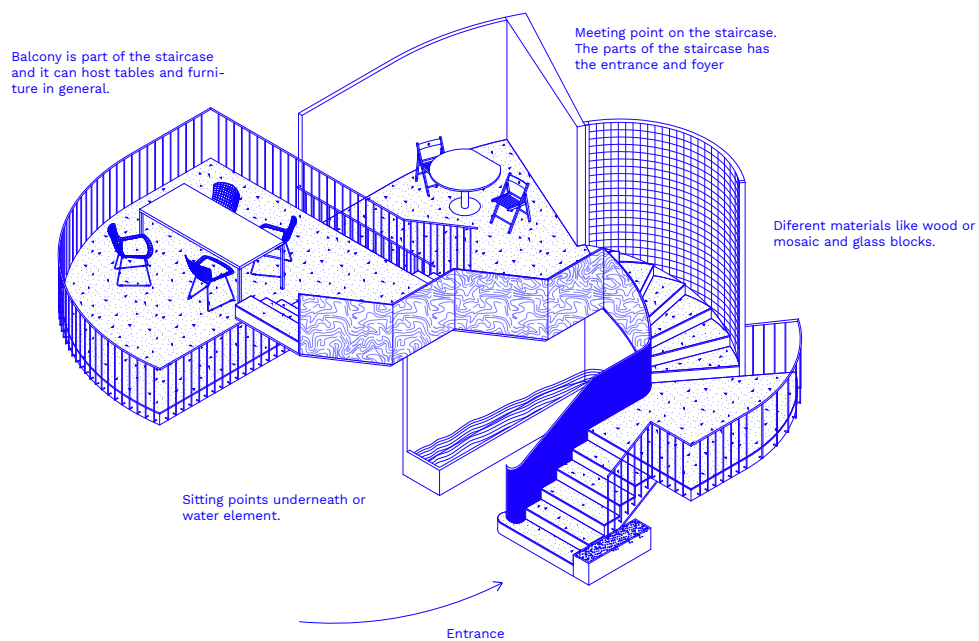
## **WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE OF YOUR GRADUATION WORK IN THE LARGER SOCIAL, PROFESSIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK.**

The project addresses pressing social issues by promoting communal living and social interaction within urban environments. It seeks to combat urban isolation and foster a sense of community through thoughtfully designed shared spaces, enhancing the overall quality of life for residents. Professionally, the project contributes to the field of architecture and urban planning by researching innovative design solutions for the Athenian Polykatoikia. It investigates sustainable and adaptable housing models that can be applied in the Greek urban environment, providing more affordable minimum-living apartments without lacking important facilities.

This research project enriches the body of research in architectural and urban studies. It blends modernism, traditional architecture, and contemporary urban planning offering a complete analysis of Polykatoikia. The paper redounds the academic discourse on sustainable urban development, informing future research and practice by building on existing qualities through the study of a prototype model of Polykatoikia and the presentation of new frameworks and methodologies.



Photo from the collection entitled "The speed of Athens" by Yiorgis Yerolymbos. The collection was part of the Greek Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2012 Exhibition/Photo source: THEGREEKFOUNDATION.COM



Elements study, Illustration made by author





## GRADUATION PROJECT TERMS

EXARCHAIA ATHENS 2024	FIRST ISSUE	SERIAL NUMBER 997
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### POLYKATOIKIA

Athenian "Polykatoikia" typically consisted of several stories, with individual living spaces or apartments stacked on top of each other. The ground floor often housed shops or businesses, while the upper floors were residential.

### MAIN QUESTION

How this flexible housing model can be adapted and re-transformed again in the future?

### TERMS

The terms of this project regarding the topics it will touch on and the method and tools it will use.

### RESEARCH TERMS

The research will be based on architectural examples related to the Polykatoikia model and theoretical manifestos. It will adopt an architectural perspective, focusing on the virtues of the Athenian Polykatoikia and identifying areas for improvement in the Athenian city through theoretical and practical examples, both national and international.

The research will concentrate on spatial development at three scales: the city, the neighborhood, and the interior.

### DESIGN TERMS

By leveraging knowledge of existing buildings, a design methodology that incorporates social and cultural virtues

will be developed. Therefore, in an empty plot, part of an existing neighborhood, the project will be anchored in order to meticulously craft the design from scratch.

Concepts and forms will be explored using media such as drawings and digital models.

The aim is to create not just an apartment building, but a community where residents can thrive. The design will feature individual apartments for urban settler, along with collective spaces for social interaction and more. The purpose is to expand the potential for communal living in the "Athens of property." Additionally, the project seeks to restore the village mentality, which is foundational to the city's structure and, by extension, to the Polykatoikia itself.

The relationship of the Polykatoikia with the city, facilitated through elements like balconies, terraces, and uncovered back spaces, is significant. Inside the building, spaces such as the foyer and staircase will be thoroughly examined to understand how these common areas can gain greater dynamism and enrich the overall project.

### STATUTE OF THE NEW POLYKATOIKIA BUILDING

1. Improvement of the common area. Perhaps more common areas/rooms to be used by the residents according to their needs (event spaces, guest room, bathhouse, laundry room, dining room, conference room) Utilization of the uncovered space as a neat garden reserved for collective activities and empowerment of the neighborhood. Spaces for collective activities. Cre-

The new Polykatoikia Manifesto, Illustration made by author

TU Delft

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