

# The House as Oikos in a City as Polis

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Buildings are more than passive containers of people and activities, buildings and space are formative as in the same time they are formable. Therefore, buildings are not primarily, art, technical, economical or technological objects, but social objects. As Lefebvre writes, “*space is neither a mere ‘frame’, after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is simply poured into it. Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure.*”<sup>1</sup>

The idea that the dwelling and the city could be regarded as social spaces is contained in the words oikos and polis and their ancient Greek origin. In ancient Greek, the word oikos (οἶκος), normally translated as “house”, signifies much more than the materiality of a built house, it means a lot more than the construction’s elements such as the bricks, the walls, the windows or the roof. The term refers to the idea of a family, everything that surrounds it, everything material and immaterial that family possesses. Also, it is usually historically charged by the origin of this family and of course signifies and is being signified by the materiality of the house itself. In that sense the word oikos touches the grounds of both the material space and the social space in the way the idea of “habitation” in general does. In that sense and with such strong connections to the society it would be impossible for oikos, both as an abstract term and as a spatial reality to remain undetached and unaffected by things like the political context, the social conventions, the climatic conditions, the building technology etc. and their changes in history. Concerning the political context, in particular, Xenophon in *Oeconomicus* discusses on the relationship of the husband and the wife within the oikos and how a man could succeed in household management. *Oeconomicus* is one of the first works in economics and a significant source about the everyday life in classical Athens. Michel Foucault quoting Xenophon writes,

“...the main value of the art of “economics” is that it teaches the practice of “archein” (ἀρχεῖν = ruling, governing) from which is un-detachable. Governing the oikos means to rule (ἀρχω); and governing the house is not different from the exercising of power in the city.”<sup>2</sup>

**1** Henri Lefebvre, *The production of Space*, N. Donaldson-Smith trans., Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1991 (originally published 1974) (pages 93-94)

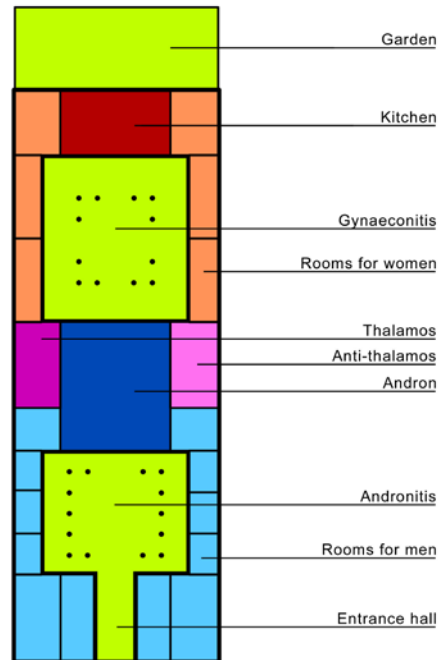
**2** Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 2. *L’usage des plaisirs*, Gallimard, Paris 1984. (p. 179 in the Greek edition, translation mine)

As it becomes obvious from Xenophon's words, the ancient Athenian oikos was a field for the exercising of power in a similar way that the city was and it is normal for one to assume that this could not take place effectively without an articulation of this idea in the spatial arrangement of both the house and the city. The typology and eventually the plan of the Athenian oikos and its origin is bound together with the social and political context and the interconnections of the social space of the oikos with other social spaces of different scales such as the city. But before attempting to find the relations of the oikos with the society and the city where it was developed it would be useful first to have a description of the ancient Greek house:

*“The plan of a Greek house naturally varies infinitely according to the size of the land plot, the size of the owner's family, his own taste, and wealth. It will usually be rectangular, with the narrower side toward the street; but this is not invariable. In the larger houses there will be two courts (aule), one behind the other, and each with its own circuit of dependent chambers. The court first entered will be the Andronitis (the Court of the Men), and may be even large enough to afford a considerable promenade for exercise. Around the whole of the open space run lines of simple columns, and above the opening swings an awning if the day is very hot. In the very center rises a small stone altar with a statue of Zeus the Protector (Zeus Herkeios), where the father of the family will from time to time offer sacrifice, acting as the priest for the household. The Andronitis is the true living room of the house: here the master will receive his visitors, here the male slaves will work, and the women also busy themselves (promptly retiring, however, on the appearance of male strangers). The decoration is very plain: the walls are neatly tinted with some kind of wash; the floor is of simple plaster, or, in a humbler house, common earth pounded hard. Under the colonnade at all four sides open the various chambers, possibly twelve in all. They really are cells or compartments rather than rooms, small and usually lighted only by their doors. Some are used for store-rooms, some for sleeping closets for the male slaves and for the grown-up sons of the house, if there are any. Dark, ill ventilated, and most scantily furnished, it is no wonder that the average Athenian loves the Agora better than his chamber. The front section of the house is now open to us, but it is time to penetrate farther. Directly behind the open court is a sizable chamber forming a passage to the inner house. This chamber is the Andron, the dining hall and probably the most pretentious room in the house. Here the guests will gather for the dinner party and here in one corner smokes the family hearth, once the real fire for the whole household cooking, but now merely a symbol of the domestic worship. It is simply a little round altar sacred to Hestia, the hearth goddess, and on its duly rekindled flame little “meat offerings and drink offerings” are*

cast at every meal, humble or elaborate. In the rear wall of the Andron facing the Andronitis is a solid door. We are privileged guests indeed if we pass it. Only the father, sons, or near male kinsmen of the family are allowed to go inside, for it leads into the Gynaeconitis, the hall of the women. To thrust oneself into the Gynaeconitis of even a fairly intimate friend is a studied insult at Athens, and sure to be resented by bodily chastisement, social ostracism, and a ruinous legal prosecution. The Gynaeconitis is in short the Athenian's holy of holies. Their women are forbidden to participate in so much of public life that their own peculiar world is especially reserved to them. To invade this world is not bad breeding; it is social sacrilege. In the present house, the home of a well-to-do family, the Gynaeconitis forms a second pillared court with adjacent rooms of substantially the same size and shape as the Andronitis. One of the rooms in the very rear is proclaimed by the clatter of pots and pans and the odor of afrying turbot to be the kitchen; others are obviously the sleeping closets of the slave women. On the side nearest to the front of the house, but opening itself upon this inner court, is at least one bed chamber of superior size. This is the Thalamos, the great bedroom of the master and mistress, and here are kept all the most costly furnishings and ornaments in the house. If there are grown-up unmarried daughters, they have another such bedroom (anti-thalamos) that is much larger than the cells of the slave girls."<sup>3</sup>

Plan of an ancient greek house



According to Lefebvre “when no heed is being paid to the relations that inhere in social facts; knowledge misses its target.”<sup>4</sup> And in the description given above one can see clearly sets of

3 <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Furniture/Furniture2.htm>

4 Henri Lefebvre, *The production of Space*, N. Donaldson-Smith trans., Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1991 (originally published 1974) (page 81)

social relations that are being articulated in space as spatial relations, they are mainly relations of power that are being materialized in space through asymmetries, categorizations and discontinuities. But before trying to find what might be these relations in material space, it would be useful to have a closer look to the urban scale and these social facts that Lefebvre refers.

The society of ancient Athens was built upon the ideals of the participatory democracy but with a closer look to the society that time and its everyday life of one cannot disregard some very important facts that make clear how “democracy” was conceived at that time. The position of the woman was under valued and the main productive power was the slaves. Even Aristotle in his division of the social classes didn’t avoid introducing slaves as one of the classes probably because it was impossible at that time to imagine of a society without slaves. In a context where the main labor power were the slaves, democracy was built and supported by the free men while women were not allowed to participate into politics and in general had a very small part in the social life. Women would stay at home while men would spend most of the day at the Agora (Marketplace) taking care of the external affairs of the oikos and participating in the political life of the city by discussing and voting. In a way, one could say that what free men were mainly producing at that time was politics and it’s not by accident that the word politics derives from the word polis. Polis, translated as city, similarly to the term oikos, has embedded in its meaning, apart from the spatial organization and the materiality of the city, also the social and political structure, the governing and the civil law and more or less anything that constitutes the city in a community of actively coexisting and interacting people. For Lefebvre the concept of production becomes an essential part of the social space and its content and the production in Athens was mainly politics. Lefebvre says for Venice, “*prerequisite of Venice’s development was the continuity ensured by a grand design, by an ongoing practical project and by the dominance of a political cast, by the ‘thalassocracy’ of a merchant oligarchy.*”<sup>5</sup> In the case of Athens it wasn’t the thalassocracy but the idea of a primitive democracy that became the dominant factor in the production of space of both of polis and oikos.

As we saw before, according to Xenophon, oikos has a lot to do with the exercising of power, in the same way that the city has and this is what the two different social and spatial scales bear in common. One would assume that because of that there are inherent relations in each of these two different scales that have lots of similarities.

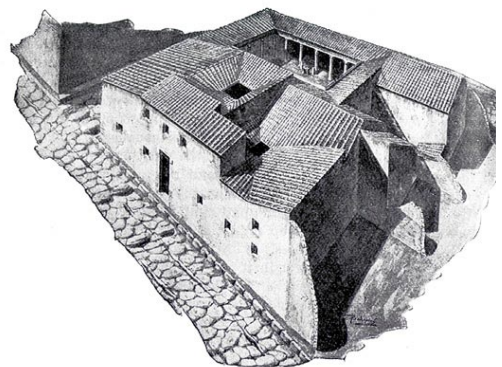
Both the abstract social space and the material consist of a universe full of centralities created by the social conventions and the social construction at that time. Both the city

**5 Henri Lefebvre, The production of Space, N. Donaldson-Smith trans., Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1991 (originally published 1974) (page 76)**

and the house were socially and materially built around men, not only in the sense of being male but in the sense of being political, therefore being able to exercise power since they are practicing on that as Xenophon describes it. *“Urban space gathers crowds, products in the markets, acts and symbols. It concentrates all these and accumulates them. To say ‘urban space’ is to say centre and centrality, and it does not matter whether these are actual or merely possible, saturated, broken up or under fire, for we are speaking here of a dialectical centrality.”*<sup>6</sup> On that way the centre of the city (polis) becomes the Agora which is, apart from a marketplace, the place for men’s gathering, discussing, voting and deciding about the city’s affairs. In the other hand the centre of the house, both geometrically and concerning the power, (oikos) is the Andron and again it’s not by accident that the term derives from the word andras (άνδρας) which means man. Andron is located in such a way so as to have access and be in control of both courtyards (Gyneconinitis and Andronitis) and filter the movement from and to them. Andronitis, the courtyard of men is located close to the entrance, being in that way more public and more close to the urban life while gyneconinitis, the courtyard of the women, is placed in the back of the house close to the kitchen, in a more private and controllable space. As it becomes obvious the connection between the city and the house is the man as a political being, as the carrier of power that decides for the house and for the city, representing his house. Apart from the participation of the man the house could be considered as detached from the city, or to be more accurate, could be regarded as a fragment that its main relation with the organism of the city



**Map of ancient Athens**



**An ancient Athenian house**

**6 Henri Lefebvre, The production of Space, N. Donaldson-Smith trans., Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1991 (originally published 1974) (page 101)**

is the implication of an individuality represented by the man of the house. In a broader scale the same thing happened at that time with the cities themselves in the constitution of the Greek nation where the cities were individual states that were represented by men. This idea of fragmented social space is something that traces different scales and is a factor that in a sense interconnects them.

One could probably investigate deeper and find more properties that signify the presence of a power or make a more methodical research on certain qualitative data so as to produce a more accurate analysis. But the idea here is not to elaborate on a method for analyzing the spatial syntactic of the dwelling and the city but rather to see how the idea of social space is being applied in a historical reality and how it connects different spatial and social scales.

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