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PIRAEUS: A NEW CITY FOUNDED AT THE DAWN OF THE 19TH CENTURY, AROUND THE BIRTH OF THE GREEK STATE

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BOOK REVIEWS



PIRAEUS:

A NEW CITY FOUNDED AT THE DAWN OF THE 19TH CENTURY, AROUND THE BIRTH OF THE GREEK STATE

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ABSTRACT

Book review of Nikos Belavilas, History of the City of Piraeus. 19th and 20th century (in Greek), Alexandria Publications, Athens 2021, 599 pages.

Piraeus is a charming seaside city, bustling and vibrant, filled with contradictions; a Mediterranean seaport of regional importance, with geophysical singularities and an extensive lace-like coastline; a major cultural and social urban hub of national importance, which played an instrumental role in the industrialization and economic growth of Greece. Piraeus was a newly-founded city that was designed and situated by the sea, in order to serve the maritime transportations of the newly established state. Piraeus developed around the core of the deep bay formed by the Piraeus peninsula, on the site of the ruined ancient settlement and around the humble medieval port facilities, which framed this natural anchorage, in a location that would offer the new Athenian capital the necessary sea link and the infrastructure required for the development of its maritime and commercial activities.

In this thoroughly engaging book, both in terms of methodological composition but also as a reading experience, Nikos Belavilas retrieves from an interdisciplinary domain and offers the main axes along which the narrative evolves: the city, the port and the industry. Around them revolves the history of the rapid strategic residential development of Piraeus.

Keywords:

Piraeus, seaport, Mediterranean seaside city, maritime transportations

Piraeus is not just another district of Athens, nor just its seaport, from which residents and visitors of Attica depart in swarms on ferries in the summer to reach various island destinations. Piraeus is a charming seaside city, bustling and vibrant, filled with contradictions; a Mediterranean seaport of regional importance, with geophysical singularities and an extensive lace-like coastline; a major cultural and social urban hub of national importance, which played an instrumental role in the industrialization and economic growth of Greece.

Nikos Belavilas begins his extremely interesting study with the aforementioned rather obvious but necessary clarification, which illuminates the administrative and actual autonomy of Piraeus, a city whose birth coincides with the founding of the post-revolutionary Greek state and the positioning of its capital, after several hesitations and disagreements, on the site of ancient Athens. Piraeus was a newly-founded city that was designed and situated by the sea, according to the decisions of Bavarian King Ludwig, father of Otto, in order to serve the maritime transportations of the newly established state. Piraeus developed around the core of the deep bay formed by the Piraeus peninsula, on the site of the ruined ancient settlement and around the humble medieval port facilities, which framed this natural anchorage, in a location that would offer the new Athenian capital the necessary sea link and the infrastructure required for the development of its maritime and commercial activities.

The book in question constitutes a thorough historiographical overview of the city's journey through time and space, with scientific accuracy and methodological consistency, but also a vivid and easily readable narrative which dissects facets and aspects of urban reality, examines the character of central and peripheral regions of the city, lists its toponyms and landmarks, analyzes incidents and historical events, constructing an insightful variegated portrait of this multifaceted and diverse city, which has always been and still is, to this day, inextricably linked to Athens. The city with many distinct faces and obscure or imperceptible facades, which retained its integral character intact despite the heterogeneity and class differences among those who have set-

tled and lived in it to the present day.

A highly topical research and writing project by Nikos Belavilas, a Piraeus native and Professor of the School of Architecture of the National Technical University of Athens, an architect and urban planner, who has long dealt with issues of the urban environment in an academic context. The book delves into the history of the port cities of the Aegean islands, analyzing their syntactic structures, their socio-political leanings and the imprint of human habitation over time. The present study about the city of Piraeus employs and presents a diverse historical, archival and factual material, drawn from multiple documents and scientific field research: maps and topographies, photographs and paintings, literary texts, statistics, population censuses, governmental reports, administrative documents, etc. The spatial assessment is based on architectural theory as its starting point, but at the same time employs great sensitivity and knowledge in applying philosophical foundations, anthropological tools, architectural and urban planning assumptions, environmental findings and socio-political analyses, in approaching the evolving dynamics and singularity of the urban phenomena of Piraeus. In order to introduce to the reader the "unknown" Piraeus, the city that in the two centuries of its history spread along the entire coast from Falirio to Perama and to the outskirts of Aigaleo with half a million inhabitants and a unique identity.

The charming character of multifocal, polysemous and polyvalent cities is due to the concentration of distinct elements in them; the blending of infrastructure and buildings, monuments and landmarks, micro-narratives and collective narratives, actions and sensory perceptions; the osmosis of a heterogeneous material which highlights their historical course and reveals their spatio-temporal depth. In light of this, the author tours the city of Piraeus and guides the reader, not only through the lush neighborhoods of the affluent 19th-century bourgeois, but also in the poverty-stricken, plagued by industrial pollution and cement-dust neighborhoods of the refugees and economic migrants. It sets out from the large neoclassical mansions to end up in the shacks of the uprooted and the public housing

projects. It sheds light on the industrial zones of Piraeus, on the thriving industrial compounds that contributed to the city's growth and maturation, but also on the vital port operations and the arcane dark charm of the infamous areas with the cabarets, the brothels and the night clubs. The distinct character of the city of Piraeus emerges from the syneresis between fact and legend, reality and mythical perceptions, past and present, memory and history. From everything that reveals, not the "literalness" of the architectural form, the syntactic structure and the urban organization of the city, but the palimpsest of the lived experience. From everything that constitutes, not the monological linear description of historical events, urban plans and city officials, the composition of the population and their commercial and industrial activities, but the polyphonic non-linear narrative that traces discontinuities, ruptures and intersections in the cityscape of Piraeus, with the intention of highlighting the contrasts and heterotopias.

The author sketches with passion, thorough knowledge and clarity the psychograph of a city, which developed with exceptional dynamics during the past two centuries, not always along a controlled course and at a steady pace, reaching the peak of its ascent during the interwar period. A city that hosted large numbers of refugees, resulting in a hasty and unregulated sprawl of built areas and the city's expansion in all directions of the map. A city that found itself at the epicenter of the country's industrialization, with industries that flourished and grew rapidly, but suffered the blow of deindustrialization, the desolation of factories and building structures, and the devaluation of entire commercial and productive sectors. A city that was created and is traveling through time inextricably and organically interconnected with its port and everything that results from its existence and operation; the modern facilities and advanced infrastructure that have grown exponentially in recent years, following the sale of part of the port to Chinese shipping behemoth Cosco, upending the established balance of power of previous years. The port that, due to its geophysical peculiarity, its diverse anchorages and extensive social and economic hinterland,

has been the critical life-giving force behind the growth of Piraeus.

In this thoroughly engaging book, both in terms of methodological composition but also as a reading experience, Nikos Belavilas retrieves from an interdisciplinary domain and offers the main axes along which the narrative evolves: the city, the port and the industry. Around them revolves the history of the rapid strategic residential development of Piraeus, in the place of the medieval ruins, as an indivisible unit alongside the city of Athens and a significant residential dipole; as a major national and Mediterranean hub that is evolving dynamically, claiming an important position among the port cities of southern Europe. In the nine thematic units of the book, the historiographical narrative is organized along a dominant chronology dating from the early decades of the 19th century to the end of the 20th, presenting the beginnings of the new city and its transformations in space, analyzing its syntactic structure and urban planning evolution before and behind the glamor of the seafront. The narrative sets out from a thorough presentation of the plans of Kleanthis and Schaubert, which were drafted by tracing the geomorphology of the terrain and the orientation of the building blocks in the ancient Hippodamian Plan, and goes on to record the continuous variations, extensions and modifications to these plans that followed. It reconstructs the city's past image through comparative presentations of neighborhoods, buildings, streets and public spaces featuring intense social and economic life. Belavilas compiles and presents the early urban symbols, the primary organization of public space and social life through a network of buildings, which was developed rapidly within the first fifty years after the city's founding, including a town hall, a post office, a theater, education and welfare buildings, churches, hospitals, nursing homes, etc.

The book examines the neoclassical residences and mansions by the sea – everything that composed the enchanting scenography that the painter Yannis Tsarouchis recalls with nostalgia: "Going out for a stroll around Piraeus at that time was like moving about inside a gigantic theatrical set, featuring rocks and beautiful houses with statues and pediments. When I once saw in a

French book the image of a landscape by Claude Lorrain, I asked if it was Piraeus of the olden days" (Belavilas, 2021: 521). At the same time, however, Belavilas also explores the northwestern belt, the shanty town of the poor people, with the public housing projects and the shacks and the hovels, which provided shelter and housing to the refugee and migration flows that doubled the size of the city in the interwar period. The author invokes the city's cultural past and records its important landmarks as mnemonic sites, functional, symbolic and material spaces in which history and memory interact and are mutually determined, co-creating the social and cultural identity of the city. The series of mansions, "the Ziller colony," as the author calls it, consisting of permanent residences and holiday homes of the wealthy citizens of Piraeus and Athens, which were built up to the end of the 1930s along the shores of Pasalimani, Freattyda and Kastella, overlooking the Saronic Gulf, and hosting kings, prime ministers, industrialists, intellectuals and artists, make up a hybrid landscape. A place of coexistence of bourgeois residences and recreation for the masses, seeing as the lower urban classes used to pay recreational family visits to the beaches and little tavernas by the sea, right next to the houses of the bourgeoisie, forging the unified character of the city. At the same time, however, the author also diligently maps out the neglected neighborhoods of the poor: Kaminia, Drapetsona, Perama, Kokkinia, Korydallos – districts that first came to the fore after the end of the Junta (1974), when the Left and the intellectuals discovered the other, unknown, outcast and mystical Piraeus, with the noble soul, the unadulterated emotion and the genuine character.

Nikos Belavilas's analytical approaches are not univocally focused on architecture and urban planning, but propose parallel interpretations for the historical evolution of the city through the interaction of places and people. They provide a vantage point to look at the city's habitation scenes, historical facts, human behavior, political and social mores. They describe the city's heyday, with the industrial flourishing and the establishment of factories along the main roads, on unbuilt lands and orchards, attempting a thorough classification

of industries by sector and size. The chapter on industry records flour mills, potteries, soap factories, glassworks, distilleries, cement factories, fertilizer industries, oil factories and manufacturers of varnishes and paints, located in the industrial zone in the north part of the city, and later along Pireos and Thivon streets and along the west coast of Perama and Drapetsona.

The population explosion of the interwar period – a result of wars, displacement of populations and continuous flow of refugees and internal migrants, around 1898, from Kea, Kythira, Kefalonia, Santorini, Kymi, but also external migrants from Odessa and Constanta – composes a colorful mosaic of urban spaces. Nikos Belavilas lists the numerous war wounds dealt on Piraeus by the bombings in 1941 and 1944, which hit the port infrastructure, buildings and public spaces. He describes the "Kokkinia blockade" and the December events in Piraeus, which ended with the final retreat of ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army), highlighting a different collective memory, juxtaposing heterogeneities, opportunistic desecrations and traumas. The author recounts the gradual post-war recovery of the injured city, as well as the damages to the urban fabric caused by the modernizing ideas of grandeur of Mayor Skylitsis and the Junta, which destroyed the distinct physiognomy of entire parts of the city, demolishing significant historical buildings. Finally, the author notes the continuous and unfailing process of coming across the city's antiquities, which were not taken into account during the initial urban planning of the city and were not preserved, but keep surfacing uninvited during every process of its (re)construction. He also takes a critical stance towards the recent dramatic transformations that altered the form of Faliro Bay.

The book at hand constitutes a reflective journey through the multifaceted and contradictory character of the city of Piraeus, an exploration by means of multidisciplinary tools that reconstructs the palimpsest of urban space, dotted with the traces of multicultural geohistory, with the imprints of multiple stories of habitation, various different ideological uses, interpretations, admixtures and amalgamations.

An easy-to-read narrative about the port city of Piraeus, addressed to a di-

verse readership, ranging from scientists of related disciplines to the everyday inquisitive readers who are drawn by the mythology and the unknown aspects of the life of cities. A consistent historiographical study, which assesses the city's past with knowledge and so-

briety, sparks a discourse regarding the city's development, and pollinates reflection on the future prospects of reconstruction, recovery and redefinition of its physiognomy in the twenty-first century.





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Maria Moira graduated from the School of Architecture of the National Technical University of Athens in 1986. She acquired her Master's degree in the field of "Design-Space-Culture" from the NTUA in 2002. She presented her PhD dissertation in section III, "Architectural language, Communication and Design," at the NTUA in 2012 with the title: "The indiscernible city of Herakleion. Literary representations of the city during periods of reconstruction: The poetics of transition, Herakleion at the threshold of modernism. The city of authors: Elli Alexiou, Rhea Galanaki, Lili Zografou, Galateia Kazantzaki, Clairy Mitsotaki, Nikos Kazantzakis." She is Associate Professor at the University of West Attica at the Department of Interior Architecture, where she teaches Spatial Narratives; Landscape Architecture: Space, Memory, Culture; and Architectural Interventions in Historic Buildings: Methodology and Interpretation of History. In the main focus of her research interests lies the relationship between literary representations and urban places. She has participated in many conferences and has written articles in scientific journal and collective volumes. Furthermore, she has participated in the scientific team 'Critical Interdisciplinary' and is a regular collaborator for issues related to space and literature in the section "Readings" of Avgi Sunday newspaper. She is currently working as an Architect.

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