

Dissonant Heritage of Care

Children's Towns in Postwar Greece

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ABSTRACT

How heritage is identified as such and selected as worthy of preservation is, beyond material aspects, largely determined by the narratives of history and memory. This paper discusses the built legacy of postwar children's institutions in Greece and its marginalization within formal heritage processes. Children's towns *paidopoleis* in Greece, the first of which emerged at the outset of the Greek Civil War (1944–49) following WWII, were a project undertaken by queen Frederica to help war-affected children. The queen's campaign not only was humanitarian but also served an agenda of anticommunist Greek nationalism in favor of the Greek government and the palace. The towns are therefore also a battleground of conflicting viewpoints what is reflected in the evaluation and designation as heritage. Taking as an entry point the children's towns in Dovra and in Ziros in Northern Greece, whose legacy has been colored by the trauma of the Greek Civil War, built environments of children's institutions are discussed in terms of entanglements, competing voices, and their current state. This discussion shows how long-lasting war trauma contributed to the obscurity of the built artifacts of the children's towns, which are nearly absent from heritage inventories, offering a critical window into the challenges that sociopolitical debates pose in the theory and practice of historic preservation.

From Croatia to Switzerland to Greece

Spurred on by a post-WWII spirit of optimism, policymakers, pedagogues, medical experts, planners, and architects across war-devastated Europe turned their attention to establishing children's communities.¹ These projects for children represented a particular moment in the history of pedagogy and institutional care, a moment that embraced community, the protection of childhood, educational reforms, and humanitarianism. The intersection of architectural and pedagogical thinking was notably recorded in the publication *The New School* by the Swiss architect Alfred Roth, first published in 1950, which was to be followed by several subsequent updated editions. Roth described the so-called "children's village" as "a new type of school, similar to the country boarding school type", which "was created during the last war", pointing to Granešina Youth City in Zagreb and Pestalozzi Children's Village in Trogen, Switzerland as postwar examples of special schools.²

Granešina Youth City, or Grad Mladih, was conceived by Croatian architect Ivan Vitić in 1948 as a pioneer city for children and consisted of housing pavilions and communal spaces loosely arranged in the topography. As a result of numerous articles in architectural magazines, including *Arhitektura* (1948), *Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst* (1953), and *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (1954), Grad Mladih became well known in the immediate postwar years.³ The complex was partially renovated in 2004 and inscribed in Croatia's register of cultural properties in 2005.⁴

Pestalozzi Children's Village in Trogen, one of the best-known children's villages worldwide, was founded by a group of idealists formed by the Swiss philosopher Walter Robert Corti. It was a community for war orphans from Europe, initially from France, Finland, Greece, Poland, Austria, and Germany. After a series of studies commissioned by Hans Fischli were carried out assessing the viability of using prefabricated barrack huts for children's communities, the children's village was realized in the form of permanent housing units in a regional-traditional style (Hei-

matstil) between 1946 and 1948.⁵ The International Federation of Children's Communities, which was established in 1948 under the patronage of UNESCO, promoted Pestalozzi Children's Village as an international model for children's communities, reaffirming the leading role of Switzerland in child welfare developments.⁶ Due to its architectural value and social history, Pestalozzi Children's Village has been designated as heritage entity of national importance in the Inventory of Swiss Heritage Sites since 2000.⁷

Around the same time Granešina Youth City and Pestalozzi Children's Village were constructed, in 1946, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Schweizer Spende – better known in French as Don Suisse, a humanitarian aid and reconstruction organization founded in 1944 by the Swiss Federal Council to support the victims of WWII – initiated the construction of two villages for war orphans in Greece, each designed to accommodate eight hundred children: one in Ziros, in the prefecture of Preveza, the other in Dovra, in the proximity of Thessaloniki. Despite these children's villages being two of the most typical projects for children designed by Schweizer Spende's Construction Office, they became a matter of contention within the Greek national context, associated with the controversial history of the Greek Civil War (1944–49), which erupted at the end of WWII.⁸

In contrast to Granešina Youth City and Pestalozzi Children's Village, which have both been celebrated for their architecture and social history and designated as heritage within their national contexts, the built environment of the Greek children's towns is burdened with “dissonant” feelings, memories, and episodes. This paper employs the Greek case of children's institutions to interrogate how social values and narratives are attached to objects and sites and impact the destiny of their built environments. Having situated children's towns within a broader context of the postwar built heritage of child welfare, it will now be examined how a dissonant public discourse developed in connection with the Greek institutions. It will follow a discussion of how the built artifacts and sites of the children's towns came to embody this dissonance, resulting in their neglect from the perspective of architectural heritage.

A Case of Dissonance: Children's Towns in Greece

It would be impossible to discuss Greek children's towns without considering the tense sociopolitical environment in which they came into being. Within the



Fig. 1: Frontispiece of the book *Manna Mou. Ethniko Paidofylagma*, depicting the “child protection” campaign of Queen Frederica and the “child abduction” by the Communists (1949).

context of the Cold War, the Greek Civil War influenced the perception of the children's towns, which became battlegrounds for competing viewpoints about how child welfare operations and their material traces should be understood. The disturbance that children's towns created in the Greek public sphere can be described as a kind of dissonance, a term often used in music theory that refers to two or more tones that occur at the same time creating a certain tension.

The two opposing sides in the civil war were, on the one hand, the Democratic Army – the military branch of the Greek Communist Party – and, on the other hand, the Greek government and the palace, backed by the United Kingdom and the United States. The latter had as its leading figures King Paul of Greece, and his wife, the queen consort of Greece, Frederica of Hanover. In line with the anticommunist and anti-Slav agenda of Greek nationalism, the government turned against communist partisans and Slav-Macedonians in Northern Greece, who unsuccessfully tried to gain control of the country.⁹ Atrocities were committed on both sides: towns were bombarded, people were executed or detained in camps, the residents of villages were forced to evacuate, and famine and homelessness became widespread.

During this period, Queen Frederica launched a campaign for the resettlement of the children of the war-torn villages of Northern Greece, the main battlefield of the war. In 1947, the Queen's Fund – an ad hoc institution lying halfway between the established royal charities and state welfare – was established for the resettlement of war-affected children. Between 1947 and 1949, a network of fifty-three child camps or so-called children's towns (in Greek, *paidopoleis*) was set up throughout the country, hosting approximately fifty thousand children.¹⁰ The queen's child welfare campaign included the Swiss children's villages in Dovra and the Ziros, thereby assimilating them into the discourse of the queen's children's towns.

The treatment of children rapidly turned into an issue of ideological contest. In 1948 the Greek Communist Party began to evacuate children from villages under its control to children's homes in Eastern European socialist countries.¹¹ The Greek government characterized the evacuation program of the Greek Communist Party as "genocide" and a "crime against humanity" and submitted a formal complaint to the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans. In this respect, the children's towns were displayed as a countermeasure to the "child abduction" practiced by the communists.¹² Traditional Greek history represents the queen's program as *paidofylagma* (child protection) and the partisans' program as *paidomazoma* (child abduction), as characteristically depicted in the frontispiece of a book entitled *Manna mou. Ethniko Paidofylagma (My Mother, National Child Protection)* in 1949 (Fig. 1).¹³

When the war ended, most of the children living in the queen's children's towns were repatriated to their homelands, except for orphans and those whose parents were left wing, imprisoned, or exiled.¹⁴ Twelve children's towns transformed gradually into state institutions for residential childcare, operating until 1967 when the military junta abolished the Greek monarchy and turned the Queen's Fund into the National Welfare Organization. A few of the children who had been evacuated to Eastern Europe were repatriated after the end of the Greek Civil War, while for most the Cold War tensions made their return nearly impossible until the 1980s.

Closely linked to the civil war, the children's towns followed its historiographic trajectory in becoming a "cultural trauma," a term coined by sociologist Jeffrey Alexander to describe a "socially mediated process" that is "not the result of a group experiencing pain" but "the result of this acute discomfort

entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity."¹⁵ Political scientist Nicolas Demertzis draws on this idea to explain the civil war and its legacy today. According to Demertzis, a "multifaceted collective memory" surrounding the war emerged during the "politics of oblivion of the post-civil-war regime" between 1950, when the war ended, and 1967, when the military carried out a coup. After the political changeover to democracy in 1974 (*metapolitefsi*), this conflicted memory was succeeded by a "master narrative of reconciliation," characterized by a "highly selective process of restructuring the official and the collective memory of the 1940s."¹⁶ The adoption of "a disillusioned stance toward the politics of oblivion either of the 1950–74 or the 1974–90 period" beginning in the 1990s opened the way for "the reinterpretation of the official and collective memory and the experience(s) of the civil war itself."¹⁷ However, the ideological polarization within Greek society still haunts the children's towns today; in contemporary newspapers and other online sources, they are referred to as the "heritage of Frederica," the "labor camps of Frederica," or "the work of the Queen."¹⁸

The last two decades have been marked by an increasing historiographical interest in postwar children's towns, that has coincided with the mining of recent history in Greece. The period has also been a critical time for assessing the condition of the built artifacts of these institutions. Scientific studies on children's towns first appeared in the context of modern Greek studies on the civil war, aiming to illuminate its social aspects. *Studies in the History of the Greek Civil War, 1945–1949*, edited by Lars Bærentzen (1987), and *After the War Was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Nation, and State in Greece, 1943–1960*, edited by Mark Mazower (2000), were the first studies to shed light on the children of war. A decade later, *Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory* by Loring Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten (2012) offered a pioneering account from a transnational perspective of the contentious nature of children's towns during the Cold War, employing oral history and analysis of memory discourse. At the other end of the spectrum, testimonies and autobiographies have been published by former child residents of children's towns that record their experiences of childhood and their individual memories and offer illuminating insights into the life of these institutions.¹⁹

The Built Heritage of the Children's Towns

Despite the vivid discourse on children's towns, their architectural and spatial heritage remains at the margin of the Greek preservation discourse.²⁰ They are negatively seen as the material representation of the Greek Civil War, the former Greek royalty, and the institutionalization of thousands of children. Both, the built environment of the temporary child camps during the war and that of the twelve permanent postwar children's towns, have been greeted with indifference by Greek preservation authorities and organizations. An exception is the Ziros children's town, which has been characterized as a historical site, although notably no earlier than 2013.²¹

The initial children's towns during the Greek Civil War were makeshift shelters, set up mostly in existing buildings, and so the idea of place can be used to assess their spatial heritage. The permanent children's towns, which include the two Swiss children's villages erected during the Greek Civil War along with child communities built in the 1950s and 1960s and designed by established architects, are rich in architectural artifacts. These children's towns provided housing, education, and health care, organized in a complex urban and programmatic layout with dormitories, school buildings, workshops, chapels, refectories, infirmaries, and other indoor and outdoor spaces. Modernist planning and construction principles informed the design of the buildings, but they were nevertheless rather picturesque and abstractly regionalist in their architectural iconography.

In the following, the size and architectural features of this built heritage is discussed by offering a brief comparison between the two Swiss children's towns in Dovra and Ziros constructed during World War II and two characteristic postwar children's towns in Volos and Ioannina.²² The children's towns in Dovra and Ziros, which were completed during wartime and operated by Swiss organizations, remained almost unused until the end of the Greek Civil War due to the precarity of their position. The Ziros children's town started hosting children in 1948 and was soon after evacuated, while the Dovra children's town was empty from the outset. In 1951 they became part of the queen's child welfare project, after which they remained operational until the 1980s under the names "Kali Panagia" (Dovra) and "Agios Alexandros" (Ziros) as closed institutions for children.²³ The initial villages for children consisted of prefabricated barrack huts, transferred from Switzerland (Fig. 2). In contrast to urban layouts of barrack huts in military



Fig. 2: "Kali Panagia" Children's Town, Dovra, Greece (ca. 1950).

camps and holiday colonies, the arrangement of barrack huts in the children's towns in Dovra and Ziros was village-like. Both children's towns were extended over time to include permanent buildings.

Despite the characterization of the Ziros children's town as a historical site, most of its buildings are in a state of ruin: apart from a few buildings that serve as an environmental education center, the site exudes a sense of abandonment (Figs. 3 and 4) through such elements as a Swiss barrack hut in a state of decay, the merging of the old roofless school with nature, and the broken windows of the last dormitories built in the 1970s. The Dovra children's village, on the other hand, was transformed into a monastery in the 1990s. The erection of new buildings for the needs of the monastery had the effect of largely erasing the built artifacts of the children's town. Today, in Dovra, only a few built traces remain, including a 1946 Swiss military barrack hut, the stone masonry guesthouse, and a chapel, that attest to the existence of the children's town. Their history and built heritage, which is not that well known in Switzerland, has been shaped by their association within the Greek national context to the history of the civil war and the queen's children's towns, even though they predated the queen's campaign. The designation of the Ziros children's town as a historical site – based on its historical value – confirms the perception of the children's towns as a physical reminder of the Greek Civil War.

To better contextualize the treatment of the built heritage, it is worthwhile to mention two remarkable postwar examples of such towns in Volos and Ioannina. The children's town in Volos "Agia Sofia", built in 1956, was designed by Emmanuel Vourekas as a complex of separate buildings arranged

on a slope facing the sea.²⁴ The children's town in Ioannina "Agia Eleni", which dates to 1960, was designed by Doxiadis Associates in a horseshoe urban layout intended to naturally lead the eye towards the view below and the gathering and recreation spaces in their midst.²⁵ Both projects were characterized by high construction quality, attention to detail, and comparatively luxurious facilities. Not found in any heritage inventory, the children's town in Volos is not in permanent use but is instead sporadically used for institutional care, while the children's town in Ioannina has been renovated and has been functioning as a refugee hosting center since 2019.

Social history, memory, and a dissonant discourse on the children's towns have made them a difficult heritage to manage, resulting in inertia on the part of preservation authorities and organizations. While it could be argued that based purely on architectural criteria of historic preservation the

children's villages in Dovra and Ziros are not worthy of being valued as heritage entities, even if such an argument were legitimate, it would not be valid for the children's towns in Volos and Ioannina, which have also been excluded from heritage inventories.

The disavowal of this heritage stems from an imbalance between place and event, between artifact and discourse, between tangible and intangible, impairing the documentation and assessment of the children's towns, blocking any other interpretation, for instance as a document of the past or site of memory, and perpetuating the process of trauma. As Randall Mason points out in a discussion of traumatic heritage sites, the "societal values" of a site – or the "qualities of heritage places that relate to contemporary issues of social, political, and identity conflict" – can "emerge from a general alignment of a place with social conflict, and not solely from the very specific associations of particular fabric with particular events typical of heritage values". Mason further remarks that "being too responsive to the political issues of 'right now' may come at the cost of responding to conservation's traditional and central responsibilities for the 'long now'".²⁶

Conclusion

The Greek case of the children's towns reveals the role of sociopolitical debates in the identification, appropriation, and selection processes of built heritage. The children's towns are the physical evidence of the social history of children's institutions during and after the Greek Civil War, embodying the ideas and values of the society that created them, and they could be treated as such according to historical and architectural criteria. At the same time, they could also be the subject of a discussion about shared built heritage. However, the immaterial values ascribed to the children's towns have resulted in the silence of these places as heritage. In this case, heritage criteria have been replaced by conflicting viewpoints and ideologies. Considering the current quest for plurality and inclusivity, such cases point toward the urgency of dealing with the material artifacts of dissonant aspects of sites and objects and the reconsideration of values, criteria, and priorities in heritage processes.

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Fig. 3: Swiss barrack hut, Ziros Children's Town, Greece



Fig. 4: Building in decay, Ziros Children's Town, Greece

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- 1 Frontispiece, Hellenic National Defence General Staff and Dafid Antonios, *Manna Mou. Ethniko Paidofylagma*, Athens, 1949.
- 2 Ephimeros Logos, photo, ca. 1950.
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Endnotes

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