

Basson, Dr Steve (2004) Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts: The Greek agora revisited as a discontinuous subject of historical knowledge., in *Limits: Proceedings from the 21st Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, pp. 14-19, Melbourne, Victoria, 26-29th September, 2004. Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne.

Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts: The Greek *agora* revisited as a discontinuous subject of historical knowledge.

Abstract

From the conventional perspective of Western architectural history, the urban formations of the ancient Greek *polis* and *agora* represent privileged organizations of space. An understanding of these Greek conditions and experiences of the urban realm are also seen necessary for the continued preservation of those ideals of democratic inclusion, equity and freedom associated with our own contemporary public terrains of urban existence. But to what extent can Greek conceptions of the *agora* be said to correspond and merge seamlessly with the spatial norms of today? To accede to the demands of historical tradition by embracing the properties of the linear and trans-historical is to conceive the Greek *agora* as a timeless and essential product of knowledge that can be employed as the pure model by which to gauge current conditions and perceived failings of the public realm. On the other hand, by beginning to address what was especial to the limits of perception and behaviour of the Greek *agora*, would contest the old assumptions and canons of historicist continuity, immutability and origin that legitimate a particular view of the past. Through a contextualized reading of some of the rationalities, practices and constraints particular to the arena of the Greek *agora*, the following discussion focuses upon what may define the otherness of Greek urban and architectural space and with what distances it from the ground upon which our contemporary architectural and urban possibilities of public space are founded.

Introduction

When Anthony Morris described the layout of domestic structures within the urban environs of ancient Athens, he found them haphazard, cramped and largely unplanned in contrast to the gridiron organization of Miletus.¹ From the perspective of Athens, however, there was another narrative that was played out through these same narrow streets and randomly deployed houses. This concerned, as Aristotle observed, a logical urban strategy designed to delay and break up the rapid penetration of enemy forces into the city.² Ancient Greece in general and Athens in particular have long been the

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subject of Western histories that assume the past operates from same principles of urban order, purpose and meaning as today. This is no less so in relation to the concept of public and private space, a category of Greek knowledge Habermas described as having been transmitted to the present 'bearing a Roman stamp'.³ It was certainly this gift of Hellenic spatial arrangement and inhabitation that Hannah Arendt saw as a specific derivative of the *polis* or city-state, whose emergence gave rise to a new sense of individual (*idion*) and collective being (*koinon*), and to spaces of free action and speech to serve each citizen's political conditions of life (*bios politikos*).⁴ Paul Zucker saw the Greek development of urban spaces in the guise of the *agora* as an equally crucial stage in the creation of spaces dedicated to the political needs of a free and democratic assembly of citizens.⁵ This same key historical conjunction of the *agora's* activities and buildings remains to this day, according to Jenks and Valentine, a primary expression of an open space where democracy can be practiced and where the citizenry can 'feel its strength and make up its collective mind'.⁶

Born from this traditional sense of historical exemplification and reciprocity is a conception that the public spaces of the present are incapable of supporting these qualities of political assembly, participation and freedom. Such have been the concerns variously of Rowe and Koetter, Richard Sennett and Trevor Boddy with Arendt seeing the cause of this decline as a direct result of moving away from the ancient Greek models and practices of the public sphere.⁷ But to what extent can *Hellenic* ideas of the *agora* and *polis* be said to reflect or inform our own urban and architectural norms of spatial boundary, social modes of inclusion and exclusion, and conceptions of democratic practice? Conventionally it may well be claimed that the ancient Greek urban, social and political realities of space are fundamental to our own understanding, experience and assessment of these spatial relationships. But would not the logical demands of such an assertion also require that between then and now there should exist some commonality of spatial value, meaning and purpose; that Greece represents the sole condition of our historical formation and youth; and that ultimately, we too are Greek?

Whether we speak of politics, philosophy, urban space or architecture, the gaze of Western history can still be found to return to the landscapes of ancient Greece to reinforce the founding conditions of its

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reality, identity and truth. But what was particular to the past does not represent any timeless resource or natural state of correspondence with the present. This is no different for what contextually comprised the urban organization, political constituencies and social conventions of the ancient Greek *agora*. It is as an object of continued historical desire that we should beware the attractions of this *Hellenic* gift, for what lies beyond the fog of historical tradition reflects the very antithesis of what we have come to celebrate and uphold as worthy of comparison and emulation. Drawing from Plato and Aristotle amongst others, what this discussion concerns is what could be seen, said and known of the Athenian *agora* from the perspective of ancient Greek thought and practice, with what underpinned the realities and limits of their conceptions of urban space, democratic practice and freedom. And it is to this end, that this discussion also extends analysis into the theory and philosophy of the historical subject of architecture.

I

In *The City Square*, Michael Webb described the *agora* as a singularly urban phenomenon that not only represented the political and social values of inclusion and free access, but also an architectural mechanism of liberty and democracy.⁸ The substance of this narrative can be said to derive from the combined relationships of the Athenian *agora*, its surrounding buildings and the specific order of democratic practices of government and social participation directly associated with each interrelated region of this space. In particular, this concerned the main area of the *agora* where the Athenian *ekklesia*, or assembly of citizens, gathered to vote. Structures included the Bouleuterion, which housed the *boule* - the five hundred member council, and the Tholos which served as quarters for the fifty constituents of the executive council, or *prytaneis*. In addition to these, there was the law courts, or *heliaia*, where the *dikastes*, the juries and judges of Athens met.

But the *agora*, or meeting place did not reflect a purely urban condition of space. Indeed, the term could be found applied to market places, courthouses, military encampments or any site outside of the urban zone of the *polis*.⁹ The main *agora* of Athens should therefore be understood as describing but one of several locations of assembly for citizens, rather than of any singular and architecturally

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formalized location of collective congregation. This reflected an organization of space similar to the idea of the *oikos* (household), a concept that was not restricted to any urban condition of being including as it did possessions and fields within and outside the boundaries of the city.¹⁰ For the Greeks there was no formal distinction conceived between the ideas of city and country. Rather, as Finley noted, they took the city and hinterland together as a single unit, 'not as distinct variables in competition or conflict, actual or potential'.¹¹ Here there was no political, moral or cultural difference as the urban and rural elements were inseparably linked as part of the same domain. To speak of the *polis* as a specific urban entity or misleadingly as a city-state is thus to erroneously privilege the urban identity of the city and impose a more contemporary conceptualization of urban and rural distinctions.

It would also be incorrect to privilege the site of the *agora* as a space dedicated exclusively to the political and juridical needs of the Athenian *polis*. The Hephaisteion (temple of Hephaistos and Athena), the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios and shrines such as those honouring the twelve gods of Olympus point towards another and religious facet of the *agora*, a feature inclusive of the *panathenaic* way, the sacred route of procession cutting through the *agora* to celebrate Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. The formal limits of the *agora*, which separated its open spaces from all built forms, was marked out by boundary stones (*horoi*) and basins of sacred water (*perirhanteria*), with the entrances being herms, stone shafts with male genitalia set halfway up and a bust of Hermes located on top.¹² In addition to these religious characteristics, the terrain of the *agora* played host to drama and music festivals and athletics contests: activities that were themselves imbued with quasi-religious qualities. Beyond the political and sacred, the *agora* was further surrounded by stores and workshops. Next to these, the South Stoa is believed to have functioned as a centre for commerce and banking, whilst market stalls spread across the open surface of the *agora*.¹³

What the *agora* represented was no static realm of fixed or unitary relationships. This was a space of multiple and overlapping activities whose juxtaposed and interjacent orders of political, religious, commercial and urban possibility denote a complex discourse of collective space. Moreover, during the *Hellenic* era, this Athenian arena of the people saw several transitions to its profile. By the fifth century

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BC, drama and music had been removed to the amphitheatres at the base of the acropolis and athletics to the Panathenaic stadium. At the same time, the *ekklesia* was relocated south to the site of the *pnyx*.¹⁴

II

Despite the varied and interrelated activities contained within the arena of the *agora*, it is as a subject of democratic governance that this site has become most recognized. It was certainly upon the open ground of the *agora* that the *ekklesia* gathered to vote on the affairs of the Athenian *polis*. It was, moreover, from this same assembly of citizens that the five hundred members of the *boule* were drawn for a year's service in the Bouleuterion. The fifty citizens who comprised the *prytaneis*, the executive council, were extracted from the *boule*. The legislative proposals of the *boule*, which met daily, were then passed to the *ekklesia* who gathered every ten days to vote on their propositions. Three officers of state (*archon*) were directly elected for a single year's service. One of these presided over the *prytaneis*, another was responsible for the courts, religious ceremonies, festivals and arts, and third over the *strategeion*, the ten member council of generals. Here the buildings and practices of the *agora*, Bouleuterion and Tholos define the spatial identity and separations of power especial to the Athenian experience of democracy and the seeming ideal of a participatory structure of government.

This was, however, no open democracy. Within *Hellenic* Athens women, slaves and foreigners were prohibited from inclusion in the political processes of the state. The possibility of political inclusion was reserved exclusively for free-born males, reducing the sovereign power of the *demos* to an all male constituency and an ideal of democratic government based on gender, social standing, and birth. Further exclusions also applied to membership of the *ekklesia*. Aristotle, a supporter of democracy, reflected this when declaring that the standard of government would be diluted if it were to include those who were unable to fulfil their obligations due to work and those who were of an inferior 'class of person' who did nothing better than mill around the city or market.¹⁵ Aristotle also shared a general opposition to any form of democracy where the poor held more power than the rich and the principles of absolute liberty prevailed.¹⁶ Only those with sufficient wealth to be 'relieved from necessary tasks' would be suitable.¹⁷ These were the same concerns that disposed Plato to oppose all forms of

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democracy, seeing the *ekklesia* as the chief means by which the extremes of unfettered action and free speech would thrive and destroy the moral and legitimate structures of government.¹⁸ For Plato, democracy denoted an insubstantial form of government and likened its appeal to the unreasoned cravings of children and women.¹⁹

In Athens, however, limits were set not only upon the fiscal and moral nature of male constituents of the *ekklesia*, but also on the role and significance of citizens within the political processes. The reforms of Kleisthenes in 508-507 BC centred on a system designed to control the competing interests and power struggles of the Athenian clans. For this he replaced the four original clans of Athens with ten, each divided into an equal geographical region, or *demes*.²⁰ This structure was inscribed into the *boule*, whose five hundred members were drawn from each clan who provided fifty members by lot. The *prytaneis* was composed entirely from each clan group who held office in rotation with the other clans. No council member in this system was directly elected, being instead chosen by lot from machines. What unfolds here was no celebration of free participation or voting, but an organization that subsumed the individuality of the *demos* into a structure of clan identity and obligations. Deployed through this regulation of the Athenian *ekklesia* were strategic controls aimed at defeating the fear of tyranny and disorder by denying any person or clan undue levels of influence and power against which the threat of ostracism and ten years exile acted as a further disincentive. Behind this lay discourse concerned with an ideal of behavioural normality that would avert civil strife and a mode of obedience to all commands whether just or unjust.²¹ It was this narrative that was played out by the monument to the Eponymous Heroes. Set within the bounded terrain of the *agora*, these ten heroes cast in bronze gave their name respectively to each clan. They also comprised a statement, not on individuality or free participation, but on the counterbalancing of contrived clan factions, of suspicion and paranoia, and of a democratic ideal based on control, elitism, gender and division.

III

Whilst the idea of *demokratia* was based upon a denial of individuality, the Greek ideal of freedom (*eleutherios*) derived from the concept of slavery. The institution of slavery in Greece comprised a

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norm that was seen as both 'just and expedient'.²² Slavery reflected an idea, moreover, that did not contradict any notion of liberty. On the contrary, it made this concept possible by acting as its natural counterpoint. The nature of slavery was also perceived to extend beyond the corporeal state of slaves themselves, to the extent that it defined a characteristic particular to all individuals and the degree to which they could control their own thoughts, behaviour and desires. Self-mastery is where the better part rules the worse, said Plato, and where the worse part rules the better, is self-slavery.²³ This question of self-mastery, referred to by Foucault as a practice-of-the-self, underpinned the means by which individuals could attain true freedom and the full benefits of citizenship.²⁴ It was also from the proportional distribution of this innate capacity for behavioural moderation (*sophrosyne*) that political participation and freedom could legitimately be refused groups such as slaves and women, who were believed incapable of governing their own lives or those of others: "For the rule of free over slave, male over female, man over boy, are all different, because while the parts of the soul are present in each case, the distribution is different. Thus the deliberative faculty in the soul is not present at all in the slave; in a female it is present but ineffective".²⁵

In this system, the slave was an individual who was in possession of neither their body nor actions and subject to the permanent authority of others, never their own.²⁶ Free-women, whilst holding the status of citizen, were perceived as lacking in full the essential qualities of self-discipline and moderation. Women were the possession and subject of a father's or husband's demands. Women were also seen to lack control of their biological state to the extent that menstruation, pregnancy and breast-feeding rendered them slaves to their own bodily functions. Such was the nature of this discourse that women during pregnancy were discouraged from intellectual activities. The reason being, according to Aristotle, that such a practice would pass on their female and thus inherent qualities of enslavement to any unborn male child, 'for the unborn infant appears to be influenced by her who is carrying it as plants are by the earth'.²⁷ Male citizens who chose not to discipline their own desires were equally perceived unfit to engage within the political processes of the *polis*. By indulging and letting passion, rather than reason, govern their life, they had become enslaved by their own appetites and classed in the same category as women and slaves, for 'the greatest number and variety of desires and pleasures and pains is generally to be found in children and women and slaves, and in the less respectable majority of so-called free men'.²⁸

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It was from the standpoint of *sophrosyne*, or moderation, that the political and indeed cultural domain of the *agora* was forbidden to various categories of citizen. For instance, those who avoided military service, acted as cowards or deserted would, by law, be prevented from entering the *agora*, hold office as *archon*, or even enter public shrines.²⁹ Such categories also included for Demosthenes traitors, those who mistreat their parents or do not have 'clean hands'.³⁰ Thus when Diogenes enacted his critique against the privacy conventions of Greek society by masturbating openly in the middle of the *agora*, this outrage of immoderate behaviour would have rewarded him with exclusion from any right to participate in the political processes or offices of the state. Despite his claim that 'If breakfast be not absurd, neither is it absurd to breakfast in the market-place', his act of sexual gratification, whilst denying him full rights as a citizen, would not affect his personal liberty, a situation reversed in the public spaces of today.³¹

To speak of freedom in respect to the terrain of the *agora*, is to enter into a discourse on slavery and control, for it was in this domain that to be master of oneself was to be accorded the privilege to share in mastering the affairs of others. But there were limits, for this was a realm that would be slave to no individual or clan. There was no room here for unfettered personal liberties. The ideal nature of the *polis* was also a product of this same notion of *eleutherios*. The perfect state, noted Aristotle, was one that attained political independence and economic sustainability or *autarkeia*, the principle by which the *polis* would achieve mastery of itself, and avoid being slave to any other.³² For the *agora*, the presence of the stoa and statue of Zeus Eleutherios further reinforced the ideal of moderation and self-control as a condition of freedom and political participation through an architectural and sculptured expression of a god who was master of all gods and slave to none. In the end, this was no site where one could offend the gods, criticize the government or do as one pleased: the fate of Socrates was not unique. This was instead, like any other area of Athenian gathering, a policed environment that monitored the behaviour of individuals and enforced the exclusion of slaves, women and disreputable or inferior male citizens.³³

IV

A further issue that can be said to have informed the modes of inclusion and exclusion particular to the Greek experience of urban space, democratic practice, and freedom concerned the idea of *mimesis*. As recognized at least since the eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and later Thomas Paine, democratic representation was a concept unknown to Greek thought.³⁴ This derived from a Greek focus that centred upon the realities of resemblance, or *mimesis* via which the abstract relationships of representation, where one thing can count for something else, could not exist: a perceptual sense that Foucault and Paul Hirst touched on in respect to Renaissance concepts of perception³⁵. It was from this perspective, for instance, that the temple of Athena Parthenos should not be read as representing a given expression of architecture or range of religious ideas. Rather, this structure set upon the Athenian acropolis was seen to resemble in all respects the literal home of a god. It was inside that for the Greeks resided the actual presence of the virgin goddess and patroness of Athens herself, Athena. This twelve metre-high statue in ivory and gold by Pheidias did not appear to Greek eyes as some abstract reflection of Athena, but a form that captured the real semblance and thus actual essence of the goddess herself and was treated as such.

It is in these terms that the sovereign power and authority of the democratic state of Athens could only come into being when the state was physically present, that is, through the corporeal body of citizens gathered in political assembly. It was then that the material reality of the state became tangibly and mimetically manifest through itself. What this discloses is the way the *ekklesia* ideally comprised the material being and essence of the state of Athens and whose deliberations correspondingly defined the sovereign decisions and laws of the state being one and the same. In this world of ideal resemblances, the composition of the *ekklesia* was conceived as crucial, bearing directly as it did on what Foucault described as the political health of the *polis*.³⁶ For here, the state could only ever be of an inferior nature if it allowed itself to be governed by disreputable citizens or those enslaved to their passions.

It is by drawing from this same question of *mimesis* that the *agora's* associated network of council buildings can be said not to have either represented or symbolized the values of democracy. The

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function and form of the Bouleuterion and Tholos served a range of council activities that could exist under the aegis of democratic or oligarchic systems of government. Likewise, the space of the *agora*, whilst defining one of the sites upon which the *ekklesia* met, did not embody or replicate the practice of democracy. This was a multi-functional space in which several differing activities took place, only one of these being the democratic assembly of the Athenian *ekklesia*.

Conclusion

History is not about what is the same or what may reveal hidden affinities between the past and present. It is about the recognition of the limits that distance our world forever from earlier ages, with dislocations and terminations of thought, reason and belief. By exploring some of the relationships particular to the spatial, political and libertarian values of the Athenian *agora*, what this discussion has sought to demonstrate is that the ancient Greek world stands far apart from our own. To draw from their conceptions of *eleutherios*, *sophrosyne* and *mimesis* is not to discover a great and timeless gift that is essential for the continued vitality, production or inhabitation of our own architectural and urban terrains of public space. We should instead, like Laocoon, beware of such desires and what unwelcome outcomes may arise from them. For to champion the Athenian model of collective space is to entertain a domain imbued with mechanisms of policing and regulation that could only ever provide from the perspective of the present reductive opportunities for political participation, social division and gender segregation. Our use of the words democracy and freedom are, by themselves, insufficient guarantees of either the same historical use or understanding of such terms. For architecture, the task of history is not to wallow within the sentiment of traditional pre-conceptions, but to begin to read and interpret what was contextual to the spaces and forms of the past. What may arrive from such endeavours may be ambiguous, alien or even repugnant to our sensibilities. But then it is what was true to the past's realities of architectural and urban reality that should be of critical importance for history, not with what suits the comfort and familiarity of our own.

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