

THE TRANSFORMATION OF 3 INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS

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A. Historical Reference

Industrial heritage has been a significant – though relatively unrecognized until recently – part of Modern Greek tradition.

The successive stages of industrialization on the island and the production procedures followed can be traced in the remnants of the industrial architecture of Lesvos. The architectural wealth reflected in their form and materials renders them unique specimens of diversity and moderation.

The main body of industrial plants and equipment on Lesvos was formed in the late Turkish occupation period (1880-1912). The Ottoman Empire was relatively late in becoming aware of this industrialization. Since the mid-19th century, a relative liberalization combined with the opportunities offered by the policy of the state in order to provide incentives for initiative in the industrial field led to the development of industry and exports to the European part of the empire.

Lesvos was an island of substantial size and population, able to develop a systematic organization of industry. It also possessed an abundance of raw materials (olives), advanced transportation and direct connection with the industrialized areas in Asia Minor (Izmir), as well as the markets of South Asia (Odessa, Taigan), of the Balkans (Bucharest, Vraila) and Western Europe (Tergest, Marseilles). Therefore, Lesvos was the only specimen among the islands of the Aegean Archipelago where intensive industrialization took place, mainly in the field of processing olives, another result of the single-crop farming of the olive tree. In the 1913 census 162 industrial shops were registered, 113 of which were olive oil units. We also witness the noticeable presence of the two related production procedures, which processed the byproducts of oil presses, i.e. soap industries and olive kernel processing plants.

The dispersion of industrial buildings on the island is impressive: they are located on the outskirts of villages, in olive groves and in the industrial zones of the island near the coast.

Most oil presses are collective or municipal, though there are also some private.

After the Asia Minor destruction (1922) there was dramatic change in the industry of Lesvos. Isolated from the economy of the mainland and its traditional markets, with an increased transportation cost and deprived of the privileges and tax exemptions of the previous years, the local industries could not compete against their rival industries in “old Europe”. In the mid 1920s the soap industries were transferred to Crete and mainly to Piraeus, which met the requirements for a new dynamic industrial development.

However, in spite of the economic misfortunes, the oil industry in Lesvos managed to retain its vigour.

World War II and the massive internal emigration that followed it led to decline and abandonment of the major part of industrial activity in Lesvos.

B. Architecture of the industrial buildings.

The older pre-industrial manual oil presses of Lesvos follow the local architectural tradition of rural structures with a four-layer roof. Structures were initially small and served more than one related functions. At the peak of industrial development, however, larger specialized industrial plants were built, with architectural features which they borrowed from the countries from which the

technical expertise and machinery was imported. The majority of those buildings display influences from the architecture of English industrial buildings and the neo-classical trends, as assimilated and reproduced in the neighbouring areas of Asia Minor. On several occasions the structure of the buildings was based on architectural and engineering studies made by the companies which provided the mechanical equipment.

The resulting buildings were poorer in morphology than their European models, but with admirable scales and proportions.

The characteristic features of that architecture are the austere geometrical form, the use of symmetry in the formation of their facades, the four-layer roof with a pediment, which bears one or more arched or circular oeil-de-boeuf (occhio di bue).

The structure is meticulously built. The external masonries are made of stonework from local stone, which is usually left without lime-cast. For reasons of static adequacy, the larger buildings bear transversal iron traverses, which support the perimeter of the building.

The openings and corners of the buildings are framed with ashlar. In Lesvos we also witness the use of layers of visible bricks inside the stonework – following the Byzantine tradition – which also serves ductility.

Chimneys are usually made of compact bricks in a circular or octagonal shape instead of square.

The roof, casings and floors are made of durable wood, which is transported from Adramyttio, Asia Minor.

The uniformity of the buildings is sometimes broken by local structural peculiarities.

One of those peculiarities “borrowed” from the local structural tradition is the fortification of the walls with wooden bindings and the building of the upper floors from tsatma – a structure made of a mixture of wood, stone and mortar. Finally, a typical feature of the facades is the local morphological repointing tradition.

In any case, the architecture of industrial buildings is clearly rational, as form serves function. Oil presses are always on the ground floor. Soap industries have two or three floors.

During the early industrialization period, the production of soap was done in an auxiliary room of the oil presses. The first big soap industries were built after 1880. Without the need for free space and large warehouses, soap industries are designed as a big building with two or three floors. The ground floor houses the offices, warehouses, saponification tanks and the packaging of the final product. Driers are placed on the upper floors. The process of soap congelation requires several large oblong openings, which are the defining feature on the façade of those buildings. Old soap industries are distinguishable at harbours even today, by their sheer volume and regular pattern of their openings.

C. Exploitation of industrial buildings. New uses.

In 1984, when the Nomarch of Lesvos was Mr. Nikos Sifounakis, an architect who studied in Genoa and possessed a particular sensitivity in preserving architectural heritage – current socialist member of the European Parliament – a strong trend begins with the aim of exploiting historical industrial building complexes. Lesvos was the first place in Greece where organized projects were implemented for the restoration and reusability of industrial buildings. It began with a pioneering program which included the market street and the restoration – by the Prefectural authorities -

of three oil presses and a soap industry, which were converted into cultural and communication centres.

The converted buildings were the community oil presses of Mantamados (1905-1909), of Agia Paraskevi (1910) and of Polichnitos (1903-1904) and the soap industry Poulia in Plomari (1880).

Following this example, many individual owners had their private industrial buildings restored and offered to new uses.

Each of those four Multiple Use Centres, as restored and rearranged, includes the following:

- A. A large room which can be altered and serve as theatre, cinema, lecture or seminar room and venue for festive activities.
- B. Areas that serve as a library and reading room.
- C. Room of audiovisual media.
- D. Exhibition room for local folklore art collections.
- E. Small museum of the oil press or soap industry, where all the items found there are on display (machinery, etc.).
- F. Café
- G. Rooms which can house local unions (farming, stock breeding, sport, cultural).
- H. Stands for exhibiting farming and stock breeding products, pottery and home artifacts.
- I. Small open-air theatre.
- J. Small municipal youth hostels.

The benefits deriving from the preservation and promotion of part of the unrepeatable architectural heritage are inestimable – the most significant one being: The enrichment and promotion of our collective memory. All citizens, without regard to age, profession and education can meet at those cultural multi-centres and socialize with their fellow citizens and with spiritual men; they can develop their critical mind and improve their sense of aesthetics and standards through exhibitions and other artistic or scientific activities held there.

When Mr. Nikos Sifounakis was Minister of the Aegean, he designed the formation of a Network for the Historical Industrial areas of the Aegean, which would stretch from Lesvos to Chios, Samos and Syros and be the core of research and activity with the ultimate purpose of preserving historical memory and establishing a new, different use of those magnificent buildings. This network will be supported by itemized activities of historical documentation, museum promotion and exploitation of industrial buildings on the islands of the Aegean.

Because, in fact, as Antonio Gramsci wrote in 1916 (“Preocupazioni”, 31 December 1916):

“Whatever is produced in solid form, whatever causes geological change to the surface of the earth, must withstand time, must last to be adapted to new uses”.

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12-10-2005

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PHOTOGRAPHS