

## **The Urban Context of the Old Harbor of Chania**

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The purpose of this essay is to re-examine the ways in which the appropriation of public spaces and the reuse of pre-existing fabrics take place in historical preserved sites, in order to make an attempt to raise issues that would contribute to the discourse of urban planning and to the production of public space today. That will happen through the examination of the qualities and features of the old city of Chania in the island of Crete, Greece, a site whose historic fabric is under protection by law restrictions regarding new construction. Even though the examination of the specific site will primarily stay focused on the old city's modern character, a brief narrative of the site's history would be useful in order to understand the way it evolved over time and to extract the conditions that have led to its specific character today.

The construction of the old city of Chania in Crete, Greece, was initiated by the Venetians around 1250 after the fourth crusade in 1204, that led to the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders and to the breakdown of the Byzantine Empire. Crete remained a Venetian colony for almost four centuries and then passed to the hands of the Ottomans. After a revolution that led to an autonomous regime for a short period of time, Crete became a part of modern Greece in 1913. The decades of the sixties and the seventies were crucial for the redevelopment of the islands in Greece, and the primary goal for every government of that time was to transform them into tourist attractions. It was Chania's destiny to follow that specific path and to be transformed into a place that would be able to accommodate several functions that would support tourism.

In 1965 a law dictated the preservation of the larger amount of the old fabric of the city of Chania, as it was regarded as a site of historical heritage. However, the recognition of the site's historic

qualities, is a fact that only reflects a one-dimensional perception of the city. The purpose of the law was primarily to transform the city into a destination for tourists. Apart from that, the old city of Chania owes its unique character to the diversity of historic phases, through these phases the city had managed to create an ever-evolving identity that was capable of adopting new residents and customs through the ages. The result of that can be reflected on the city's buildings in terms of aesthetics. It could be claimed that freezing a city's state by setting a current situation "under protection" would consequently interrupt its capability of adoption and the ways its residents reflect their own identity on the city.

At that point, it was people's turn, under the new situation, to find new ways to intervene to the city by finding other means besides transforming the buildings. One way was choosing the function. Apart from a big number of buildings that were reused for cultural purposes, museums historic buildings temples, the residents were independently allowed to choose the destiny of their properties, and as a result to select the function of the building, as long as they would not insult the built form of their buildings. As the mainland of Crete that would provide an economic comfort for the people was far away, most of the owners chose to transform their properties to hotels and restaurants, as that seemed to be the only function that would provide them a sufficient income for living.

It is remarkable that public space was in a way the leftovers of the fabric. in these spaces the locals showed ingenious ways of intervening into public spaces. These spaces today are extensions of the local businesses, as the owners expand their businesses through temporary interventions, such as carts and baskets that they put on the narrow streets. Another interesting point would be the way these spaces are accommodated as an expansion of residences that also exist in the old harbor of Chania. Because of the warm climate, the residents expand their houses on the public spaces as an expansion of their living room or as an expansion of the entrance hallways.

The preserved fabric and, symbolically, its history dominate space. But the needs and demands of the residents and owners lead to a series of interventions that express their own character. And this character of vibrant interventions contradicts the permanency of the

preserved buildings. The old harbor of Chania is based on ephemerality, according to the desires of the owners of the buildings that lead to a several number of functions that change over time. The need to respond to an economic formula that redefines the notion of tourism every year leads to a different experience every summer. Functions move from one point of the harbor to another, new shops are created. The harbor reflects an ephemeral character as opposed to the permanent fabric of its context.

A walk in the old harbor in the summer offers to its visitor an image of how its history is reflected to its spaces. But this does not take place only because because of its historical buildings. It is generated from the several functions that are accommodated there that owe their existence, and as a result an economic prosperity of the locals, to the notion of history. Attractions as local cuisine, and a vast amount of souvenir shops create an atmosphere of a dominance of the signs in space that may disregard the preserved fabric. The symbols of history dominate space. The ephemerality of these symbols is obvious from the fact that they only last a few months . It is quite of ironical the fact that history is transformed into a product that by no means has a temporary dimension.

The old harbor of Chania works well for its purpose, to provide accommodation for several functions related to tourism and, sometimes, to maintain a local character for permanent residents. No urban design strategy or planning policy could predict the outcome. No plan for the use of the old fabric and the public space, the leftovers from the buildings, would have done it better. It works because of the actions and the customs of its people. It provides a flexibility for anything to happen. And this could be the way for urban planners to figure out how success can take place, to estimate the facts that make this specific site vibrant, regardless the fact that the site's main function is dedicated to tourism.