

ASPRA SPITIA a new "Greek" city



General view

Aspra Spitia is a small settlement planned by Doxiadis Associates for the company "Aluminion de Grece" to house industrial workers and personnel employed at its nearby aluminum plant.

Aspra Spitia (modern Greek for "White Houses"), situated on the coast of the Corinthian Gulf about one hour's drive from Delphi, was designed for a projected population of 5,000. The program proposed the construction of a total of 1,100 dwellings, including one and two-storey houses, bachelor apartments, stores and shops, a customs house, a school and recreational and other facilities.

Doxiadis Associates carried out not only the pure planning work (general plan and layout plans for residential communities and central areas), but also the study of the house types and buildings, the design of the infrastructure (water and electricity supply, sewer and storm water networks), the compilation of the tender-documents and the supervision of the implementation.

The project was assigned in 1961. The last house of the initial program was completed in 1965.



The master plan

When they started the planning of Aspra Spitia, DA's planners were faced with the question of what type of settlement they should create on that coast of the Corinthian Gulf that would best serve the needs of its industrial population and still harmonize with the environment and its history; that would do no violence to the marvellous site that had been selected, with its delicate lines formed by the surrounding hills and the olive trees; and that would constitute the proper setting for the life of the workers who would be recruited mostly from the rural population of the surrounding area

It did not take them long to reject the idea of a typical industrial settlement with uniform apartment buildings where the people would feel like expatriates and refugees, and where living would be but a continuation of working in the mechanized environment of the new factory. On the contrary, they decided that they should create a "Greek town" in which people could easily identify all the cultural traditions they were brought up with and could preserve them as a most valuable inheritance.

This was an easy thing to say. It was more difficult to decide how it could be achieved without reverting to superficial imitation, picturesque trivialities or anachronistic sentimentalities. How could visual richness and individuality of expression be effected without resulting in structural confusion and aesthetic chaos?

The conclusion drawn by DA's planners was that they needed a simple, clear and strong plan incorporating these desirable qualities and with its "invisible geometry" holding the varied parts together. That they needed a simple, strong and "primitive" architecture composed of natural, local materials, which the people could add to with flower pots and pergolas, rather than a modern architecture in which the visual equilibrium can be upset by the addition of a dot.



At Aspra Spitia, DA aimed at recreating the atmosphere of the typical Greek village.

These thoughts are reflected in the general plan of the town: on the L-shaped site (the short leg of which is bordered by the sea, while the long one is flanked by two hills) four neighborhoods were created, each surrounded by a peripheral road and penetrated by culs-de-sac in selected locations only. At the junction of the two legs of the L, the shopping, business and civic center was set up, with the administrative center just below it. A zone along the waterfront was reserved for recreational and tourist facilities.

Then, each neighbourhood and the center were studied in great detail with particular attention to the feeling of space one would have in walking through its pedestrian ways, small squares, streets and piazzas. The aim of DA's planners was to create a sequence of spaces in which scale, form and character would follow the sequence of importance of "events" in the life of the town. Each little street and square were studied separately, using sketches and three-dimensional models as well as the facades of the buildings that would constitute the main closure of space. A comparison of the completed structures with a photograph of the model and a sketch of a proposed row of houses shows that the desired result was achieved to a remarkable degree.

In the housing study the main effort was to realize the maximum visual richness with standardized house types. Twelve different types were used to serve the requirements of the program. Each design could be built in stages, so that the twelve basic units other house types formed in intermediate phases of construction could be added, raising the total number of elements available to be played with to more than twenty-five. Further variations were introduced by altering the basic units according to north or south orientation, corner location, and so forth.

The planners chose to use only one type of house in each row to create a more coherent and disciplined community organization, to simplify the construction and to reduce costs. Even so, through the use of the above mentioned variables, combinations of "lefts" and "rights," varying distances of set-back, and so forth, it proved possible to arrive at a rich though unified result for each row. Exterior-finish materials of the houses are stone, concrete



A typical street in Aspra Spitia



General view

and wood joinery. The great majority of the stone walls of the houses are whitewashed except for a small number, in certain locations, where a special accent was sought by leaving the stone unpainted or by the use of color. By eliminating the "accident" of color, the whitewashing of the walls gives the houses greater sculptural clarity and simplicity, accentuates their texture and gives a marvelously "Greek" effect combined with the color and shape of the olive trees.

In addition to the sculpturesque design of the facades of the buildings, the three-dimensional effect is enhanced by the use of a variety of elements in the design of yards and streets, such as stone walls and fences, steps, pergolas, pavements of different textures (stone, concrete), grassy areas, and benches. A particular effort was made to preserve existing olive trees by integrating them into DA designs for front yards, street areas and piazzas; these have been supplemented with new plantings.

Many visitors to Aspra Spitia affirm that this small settlement possesses the special urban feeling characteristic of Greek cities of the past - a feeling induced by a town in which cohesion does not abolish individuality, privacy in interior yards does not conflict with social togetherness in the street or square, and the physical scale and treatment express the hierarchy of values in urban living.