

## ETHNIC AND GENDERED SPACES: THE GREEK-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN EARLY WEST OAKLAND

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### ABSTRACT

West Oakland was largely built up and in-filled by the 1880s. Yet numerous ethnic groups continued to settle in the area— for example, Scandinavians, Germans, Irish, Portuguese, African-Americans, Greeks, Slavs, and Asian-Americans. What impact, if any, did these groups have on the built environment? Our research indicates that the Greek-American community, as an example, did adapt both domestic and even commercial buildings to conform to traditional aesthetics, architectural plans, and gender roles. Domestic structures were redesigned to reflect the "Summer house and Winter House" pattern found in Greece. In addition, Seventh Street was once lined with Greek coffee-houses, which served both married men and the many bachelors of the community. These spaces are compared to those created by and dominated by Greek-American women.

By 1900 West Oakland, California, was a heterogeneous mix of social classes, ethnic groups, land uses and building types with little or no space for additional construction or in-fill. Numerous ethnic groups continued to settle in the area, however,--Portuguese, African-Americans, Greeks, Italians, Slavs and Asians--and eventually these groups replaced the earlier Irish, German and Scandinavian workers.

From extensive oral-history interviews it is clear that immigrant communities in West Oakland were keenly interested in retaining their cultural heritage and identity--while becoming American. For the most part ethnicity was celebrated privately and in the safety of the home. But occasionally a group's expressive culture was public as, for example, in the Portuguese-Azorean procession of the Holy Ghost each Pentecost or the games of bocce (actually *palla di formaggio*) which Calabresi men played in the gutters along Market Street (Hattersley-Drayton 1997).

But what impact, if any, did these various groups have on the built environment? Urban studies would suggest that immigrants perhaps added window dressing, signage, local color but little more (Conzen 1990:234-235). Our research, however, indicates that West Oakland's small but vibrant Greek-American community adapted both

domestic and commercial buildings to conform to traditional aesthetics, architectural plans and gender roles. In addition, one entirely new building was constructed when the local community erected the Byzantine plan Greek Orthodox Church of the Assumption in 1921.

Although a few Greeks lived in San Francisco as early as 1864 (Connelos 1989:134) the significant Hellenic communities in the Bay Area, and throughout America, date to the turn of the century. The year 1907 was pivotal for Greek immigration to America due to the collapse of the Greek economy (Kopan 1990:76; Papanikolas 1974:104) with 46,283 Greeks arriving in the United States. By 1908 there were 5,000 Greeks in the San Francisco Bay area with 450 officially reported living in Oakland (Georgas 1974:6).

The 1910 census recorded 100 newly-arrived Greek workers living in boxcars at the end of Seventh Street in the Southern Pacific railroad yard. As few as 5 and as many as 16 Greek countrymen also lived cooperatively in rented housing nearby, sharing beds or sleeping on the floor, and rotating the housekeeping duties (Christie 1981:5, Kosmos 1995:1,3; A.T. Mousalimas 1980:1; cf Kopan 1990:71-72; Papanikolas 1974:138).

Although West Oakland never had a Greek Town per se, initially Greeks did tend to cluster together in this mixed-use Oakland Point district. Paul Christie (1981:3) recalls "You could see men of my country, walk through the streets. When the whistle blew, you know, it was fantastic. I watched them go home. You sit on the porch and watch them, see?" Christie, incidentally, lived at 403 Pine Street, next door to Jack London's boyhood home. In addition to the Southern Pacific railroad, Greeks in West Oakland worked as fruit and vegetable peddlers and bootblacks. Eventually many opened restaurants and candy stores and by the 1920s there was a thriving Greek business community along Seventh Street, between Pine and Chester.

One of the most important business enterprises for any Greek-American community was the *kafenion*, or coffeehouse and by 1923 there were reportedly 23 coffeehouses in San Francisco (Georgas 1974:40) and several in Oakland. As in Greece the American *kafenion* was a gendered space: a men's club, political forum, and labor recruiting office (cf Balabanis 1970:37; Dubisch 1986:39-40). Men of all economic strata met to drink Turkish coffee, eat traditional pastries, play games of chance such as *tavli*, smoke the *narghile* and read local newspapers (Kopan 1990:80-81). The *kafenia* in West Oakland provided copies of American Greek newspapers including the *Kalifornia*, first published in San Francisco in 1907. Local coffeehouse interiors were similar to ones found in other Greek American communities with bare tables and chairs and Greek flags and prints of the 1821 Revolution adorning the walls (Mousalimas and Lalantonis 1997; cf. Daskarolis 1995:32-33; Papanikolas 1974:118-119; Saloutos 1964: 78-82).

Oakland's Greek entrepreneurs, however, made immediate concessions to their adopted culture by incorporating pool and billiard tables into their establishments. Another nod to acculturation, apparently atypical for other American *kafenia*, was the inclusion of women who were admitted for the occasional puppet performances put on by the itinerant *Karagiozi*.

Early Greek immigration to West Oakland, as throughout America, was almost exclusively male. As Greek women did arrive in America, families

were established and the patriarchal, patrilineal social structure was reinstated. Living conditions for male workers definitely improved with the presence of women (Kopan 1970:73, 77) and traditional notions of building and space were also gradually adopted although not without modifications and adaptations.

Initially, residential patterns were often far from either traditional norms or the ideals of the domestic reform movement (cf. Cohen 1986) although conditions in West Oakland, for example, never reached those of the slums of the Greek neighborhood surrounding Chicago's Hull House (Kopan 1990:70). As an example, a home at 392 Wood Street, described in the Sanborn Map of 1912 as a one bedroom, single family residence, was in 1920 shared by as many as seven adults and two children. The Georgakopoulos family, parents and two daughters, slept in one bedroom; three bachelors related by blood or religious ties to the family shared the "living room;" and other male boarders rented out the remaining "bedroom." Mrs. Georgakopoulos cooked and cleaned for all the men in the household who bathed at Japanese and Chinese owned facilities on Seventh Street as the house lacked an indoor bathroom. A toilet was included in the basement.

As with other American immigrant groups the kitchen became the center of the house (Cohen 1986:269-270), reflecting not only the lack of an available parlor or living room but also a continuity of experience from Greek traditional social patterns (Du Boulay 1974: 24-25). Even after families moved into larger quarters the kitchen (the Greek hearth) remained the heart of the home.

Traditional holidays were celebrated with passion by the local Greeks and yards in West Oakland were important social spaces as well (cf Friedl 1964:40). As Gregg Kosmos (1995:6) recalls, "Every January 6th was my father's name day. We would cook lambs out in the yard and have over two hundred people come through here. Dance Greek just till the house fell down!"

As economic resources improved, and through a combination of hard work and frugality, Greek-American households shifted to single-family residences which were rented or purchased. More space allowed for the

differentiation of space and the concomitant reinstatement of ethnic and gendered values. As an example, the raised one-story Victorian cottages of West Oakland were easily modified to create a variant of the summer house/winter house (or *apano*/upper *kato*/lower) pattern which was typical for rural Greece. Thus, basements were converted to include a large space for socializing and a kitchen which was used for all heavy frying and canning (Karnegis 1996:11, Mousalimas 1996a:27, 1996b:10,13; cf. Friedl 1964:39-41). During the summer families might set up cots in the basement and sleep downstairs (Kosmos 1995:15). As in Greece the only communication between the upper and the lower houses were the outdoor stairs (cf. Friedl 1964:12).

The upper house thus contained the winter room (the all important family kitchen), bedrooms and the *saloni* or living room. In Greece this "best room" was a formal space which mediated between the public sphere of the outside world and the private sphere of the family. Thus, strangers would be received in this room and rites-of-passage (name days, weddings, baptisms) were celebrated here. Typically the *saloni* was a showcase for family pictures, prized bric-a-brac and a daughter's trousseau trunk. In poorer households this room was also used for sleeping (Dubisch 1986:20; Du Boulay 1974:22-24, 27; Friedl 1964:39-41).

In these West Oakland homes the *saloni* became further differentiated as a ritualized gendered space. Thus, although in theory it remained a public reception area, in fact these rooms were seldom used. Second generation Greeks describe these spaces as "museums" or "shrines" and definitely off-limits to children. The *saloni* contained the family's best furnishings (usually draped in protective white sheets), family photos, hand-crocheted lace and doillies "all over the place, on the tables, on the back of the chesterfield, on the arms of the chairs," and pictures of Greek revolutionary heroes (Kosmos 1997). Although it is tempting to see these rooms as a response to Victorian values and "parlorization" (cf. Cohen 1986: 263, 269-70; Spain 1992:123) in fact the *saloni* is Greek and ultimately Greek-American (c.f. Teske 1974).

Lizabeth Cohen (1986) in her article, "Embellishing a Life of Labor...", has suggested that American immigrant workers may have come to a greater appreciation of household interiors as a response to American urban housing, much of which was substandard (Cohen 1986:268). Although they could not exert control over the exterior they could indeed modify and control the interiors of their homes. Perhaps her theory partially explains the passion given to creating and maintaining these rooms. Certainly the *saloni* in early West Oakland represented a gendered landscape. Traditionally the public world of the Greek village was a world of men, whereas the private world of the home was the woman's sphere (Du Boulay 1974:33; Friedl 1964:12, 42, 90). Ultimately these patterns of stratification and segregation were transferred to America. As Gregg Kosmos recalls, "The men ruled, but most men were smart enough to allow the woman to run the eminent domain of the house" (Kosmos 1995:26) Here, unlike in Greece, women could and did shop in public but some areas such as the many *kafenias* remained off-limits. Seating within the Greek Orthodox Church was also segregated and stratified by gender. Although a few Greek women worked as car cleaners or seasonally in local canneries, for the most part women were not allowed to work outside of the home (cf. Kopan 1990:100; Saloutos 1964:87)

Thus the house became both a fortress and a sanctuary. Trula Karnegis (1996:8) recalls her mother's daily routine: "She washed, she ironed, and cooked [slight laugh] and washed the dishes. And the same thing the next day. Saturday night we went downtown, Seventh Street. That was it." Greek women did eventually develop a richer social life through church groups and voluntary associations such as GAPA and AHEPA. Still the importance of home for these early immigrants cannot be underestimated.

The woman safeguarded the religious and moral values of her family through the home. Each evening she lit the votive *kandili* at the religious shrine which she often kept next to the preserved wedding crowns (*stefana*) from her marriage. The purity of the home was in contrast to the pollution of the outside world and many Greek American women maintained strict spatial boundaries by not allowing non-Greeks into the home. Houses were

rigorously, even fanatically, clean. Everything had to be "perfect, perfect, perfect," as one second-generation woman recalled. Greek women in West Oakland --as with Italian women in East Coast cities--often extended these boundaries to include the immediate street area (cf Mathias 1974). Each Saturday morning the women carried buckets of hot water and soap outside and scrubbed down the sidewalk: "Man, those gutters on Saturday, you could eat off of them" (Kosmos 1995:10).

In conclusion, although the rural architecture of ethnic America has been richly documented, little scholarly attention has been directed toward the urban experiences of immigrant groups (Upton 1986:9). However, when one peels away

the veneer of the row house or the Victorian cottage one may find spaces architecturally redefined by both ethnicity and gender. In West Oakland's Greek community we have seen both the transplantation of a traditional Greek house type and the preservation of and traditional use of rooms and gardens, as well as the adaptation of male and female-designed spaces.

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