

The Idea of Space in Greek Architecture

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propylaea immediately discloses the chief attributes of the building; without change of position he can envisage the full extent of its form. Movement towards the altar progressively diminishes the degree to which the long (south) side can be seen, and finally only the east front – in full elevation – is visible. In general terms then, there is, in this short distance, a rapid visual modelling of the temple which terminates in the formal apprehension of the main front. Approach to the temple itself is by means of an inclined plane; a method which also occurs in other examples, and which, from the point of view of ritual or procession, would offer a continuity of movement and a subtlety of transition that could not be afforded by steps.²⁹

The group of buildings at Aegina offers an admirable demonstration of the critical disposition of elements in a Greek sanctuary. It has the necessary number of terms for a spatial 'equation' of an advanced order, yet it is free of secondary elements which, though they may be productive of greater refinement in the total integration, would at this stage load our discussion too heavily.

The sanctuary of Aphaia has a unity of conception that is lacking at Selinus, and may thus be taken to reflect a positive stage in the attitude of Greek temple builders to the problem of providing an adequate setting for the ceremonies of the people.

(c) *The Temple of Athena Parthenos at Athens.* The Periclean scheme for a sanctuary that would surpass any known in the Greek world brought about an arrangement that is impressive for its daring and vitality. In fact the Acropolis has by common judgement come to be regarded as a symbol of the highest achievement in classical architecture. Our present purpose is restricted, however, to an examination of the experience of a spectator who approaches the sanctuary, so that any other form of assessment must be omitted.

We have noted earlier that this particular site has received considerable attention from historians and archaeologists, at the neglect, perhaps, of other potentially interesting groups which

²⁹ The ramp as a means of reaching one level from another is employed today as an architectural solution where the conditions demand 'continuity' rather than separation. For examples see Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret: *Oeuvre Complète*—Vols. 1 and 2.

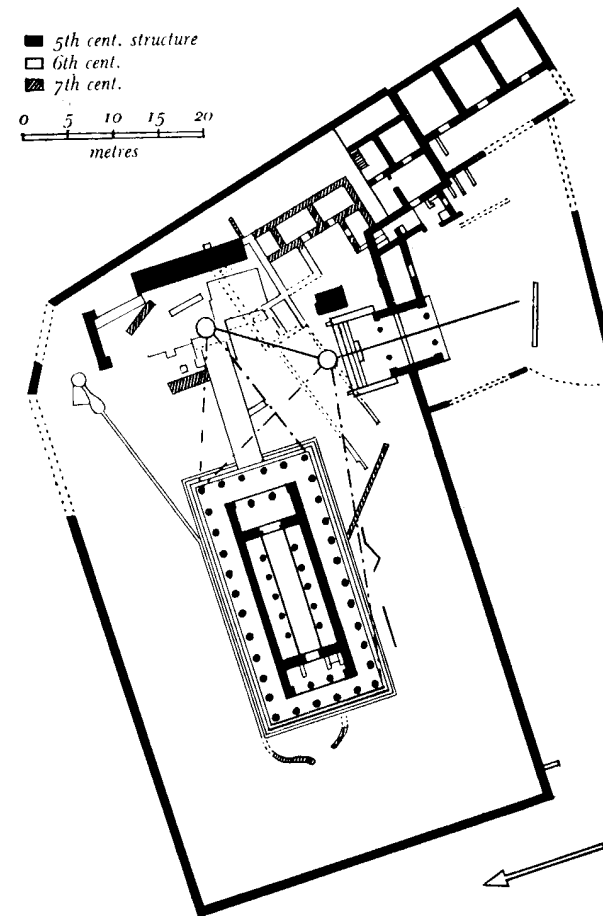


Fig. xx. Plan of the Sanctuary at Aegina, showing the nature of the views obtained of the temple from points on a pathway leading from the propylaea to the east front of the temple.

After Furtwängler

given the necessary investigation may well throw light on the problems of the Parthenon setting.

The chief factors to be noted as a background to our analysis are as follows:

The Acropolis is a bold and isolated feature of the landscape that contains it, and the buildings that crowned it appeared as a compact, unified scheme. From the west the Propylaea and the Parthenon composed in a striking articulation. From the south the great length of the Parthenon gave direction to the whole mass, and from intermediate viewpoints the structures combined in a changing pattern of three-dimensional effect. The upper surface of the Acropolis was uneven, its outline was irregular, and approach was restricted and difficult. The Propylaea was placed at the only feasible point, on the west; and the Parthenon lay on the highest point of the Acropolis.³⁰

The Propylaea in this example has to fulfil not only the functions defined previously, but owing to the complexity of the site and its great area, it frames the change in level between the surroundings of the Acropolis and its upper surface. This was not possible in a literal sense, the dimensions being too great to be covered by a single building of the propylaea type, but the structure is treated so that it 'embraces' the western slope of the Acropolis, and at the same time bears a positive architectural relationship with the temple that is the focal point of the sanctuary.

The Periclean Propylaea is thus the most complex type that is encountered in Greek architecture, and its great size and bold silhouette do much to offset the limitations of a difficult site. In earlier times a smaller and differently oriented entrance was situated at the same point, but the present structure designed by Mnesicles is on a much larger scale. As finally carried out the Propylaea was only a fragment of the original scheme. Dörpfeld and others³¹ have suggested the form that was originally intended, but for the purpose of an investigation of its essential spatial attributes we shall forego speculation. The 'depth' portion of the Propylaea was actually built, and from the point of view of the spectator this portion satisfies the needs of his approach to the sacred enclosure.

³⁰ Generally FOUGÈRES.

[a] Generally PICARD.

³¹ D'OOGHE. Page 172 ff. excellent chapter on the Athenian Propylaea.

On either side of the processional way projecting Doric porticoes frame the approach, and directly ahead the hexastyle colonnade of the central structure rises high above the spectator. There are five openings, the central one being wider than those on either side to provide ample space for formal processions.³²

Within the structure the usual system of two porticoes is found, but two rows of Ionic columns in the west portico continue to mark the width of the central opening as far as the wall which separates the two porticoes, and which in turn is pierced by five openings. The effect of this columned corridor within the portico is one of emphasis to the *depth* of the structure, and consequently of prolongation of the sense of transition in the spectator. In addition there is a gradual change of level within this west portico, so that by the time the eastern limit is reached movement with two components (horizontal and vertical) has been undergone *within* the propylaea.

The general space significance of the propylaea has been discussed in the previous study of the Aphaia sanctuary; we may note in the present context the additional complexity that was deemed necessary to meet the special conditions of the Athenian Acropolis.

Let us imagine a spectator about to emerge from the Propylaea. Ahead of him, and slightly to the north, stands the tall statue of Athena Promachos, and behind it the Erectheion. To the south-east the Parthenon stands on higher ground. Assuming these elements to have had no obstruction other than that caused by the sanctuary of the Brauronian Artemis, we may reasonably suppose that a procession would approach the east and principal front of the Parthenon by traversing the long north side and turning south to reach the front of the building.

In this way a progressive image of the building would be made up of:

(i) The distant initial view from the Propylaea, which is sufficiently removed and sufficiently far off the east-west axis of the Parthenon to give an adequate three-dimensional impression without overmuch preoccupation with its detailed treatment.

(ii) An increasing angle perspective as the spectator approaches

³² D'OOGHE. The central opening is 13 ft 8 in. wide and 24 ft 2 in. high.

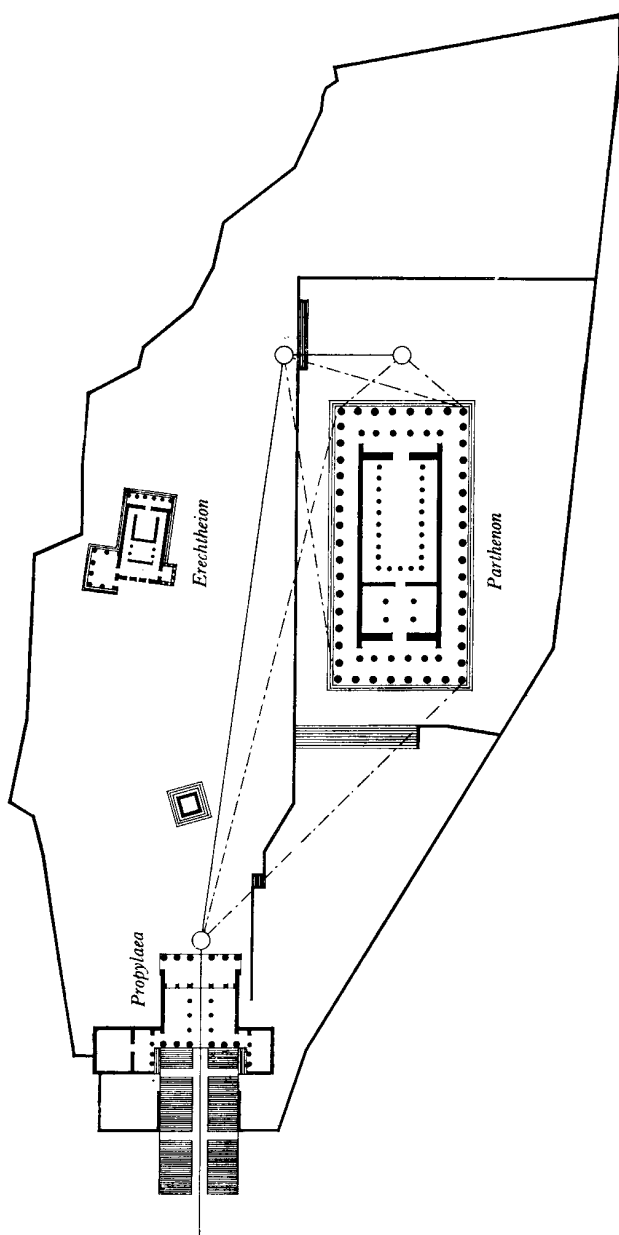


Fig. xxi. Plan of the Acropolis at Athens, showing the nature of the views obtained of the Parthenon from points on a path leading from the propylaea to the east front of the temple.

the north-west corner of the Parthenon with growing comprehension of the architectural treatment.

(iii) The comparatively close and unchanging view of the north side along which his path lies.

(iv) The culminating direct view of the east front,

In comparison with the effect achieved at Selinus it will be seen that there are considerable differences in the nature of this approach to a climax, although some of the terms are common to both. First, the initial view from the point of entry is a distant one, where that at Selinus was close, so that an additional space was covered by the spectator before he actually skirted the building; and secondly, the Parthenon although partially obscured by the sanctuary of the Brauronian Artemis, did not suffer the type or degree of visual interference that was encountered on entering the sanctuary of Temple 'C'.

At Aegina the initial angle view was completely unobstructed but relatively close, and the spectator in approaching the main front of the temple did not traverse its side; the degree of cognisance was therefore less complete than at Athens and Selinus, though the first 'picture' must have been sharper and more organic than it was in either of these examples.

The researches of Gorham Phillips Stevens into the treatment of the Athenian Acropolis point to an entirely different approach to the east front of the Parthenon than that usually assumed from the extant remains. In his recently published monograph³³ on the Periclean Entrance Court he presents arguments which, if acceptable, must revolutionize our ideas on the arrangement of the Acropolis buildings. Stevens does not accept the apparent approach to have been the one employed in Periclean times. He suggests that the approach was defined first by a high Mycenaean wall behind the giant statue of Athena, and parallel to the east face of the Propylaea; and secondly by the complex formed by the sanctuary of the Brauronian Artemis. Finally an irregular forecourt against the west façade of the Parthenon is postulated, and this is approached through a small propylon in its south-east corner.

One immediately notes the awkward changes in direction

³³ STEVENS.

involved in such a scheme (especially for processions), the unsatisfactory screening of the Parthenon, and the restricted approach to the east front of the temple. According to Stevens the processions would split into two streams, one along the south and one along the north of the Parthenon.

Today the spectator sees the full form of the Parthenon from the Propylaea; the lines of the crepidoma and the screen of the columns proclaim order on the sloping rock. The rise and fall of distant horizons are measured by their geometric exactness. If these attributes were negated by the obscuring of the temple, if the path to the altar were so tortuous and subject to so many changes of scale and so many interruptions, then the plastic effect of the group as a whole must have been sadly weakened by the dictates of outside influence. Whether it was political opportunism or the sanctity of tradition that interfered with the 'pure' composition of the buildings the outcome was unfortunate if Stevens' findings are correct.

If the Periclean arrangement suffered these disabilities we are forced to return to a distant view of the Acropolis, and in seeing it as a whole to seek the splendour and capture the Attic perfection in unity that were apparently denied the spectator within the sanctuary.