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On the origin of the architect: Architects and *xenía* in the ancient Greek theatre

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Introduction

Seeking precedents for a language to explain architecture's political and ethical functions, this paper is a historical case study focussed on the earliest ancient Greek records of architecture. This study reveals the ethical principle of *xenía*, a form of ritualised hospitality permeating architecture and directing architectural practice towards accommodating the needs of people broadly labeled foreigners. It will be shown that *xenía* in ancient Greek architectural thinking was so highly valued that even a fractional shift elicited criticism from Demosthenes and Vitruvius.

This paper will use the definition of *xenía* given by Gabriel Herman in *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (1996), then add the four distinct kinds of foreigners given by Plato in *Laws*, and consider the hospitality offered to these foreigners by architects. Some forms of architectural hospitality such as hostels are closely tied to our contemporary sense of hospitality, but others are contingent on the cultural priorities of their day. When ancient Greek authors considered residential architecture and *xenía* together, it was explicitly in the context of a larger political framework about *xenía* and architecture; for Demosthenes and Vitruvius, architectural investment in residences showed diminished respect for *xenía*.

The more unusual alliances between architects and *xenía* appear in the theatre, both in characters on stage and in the theatre's furniture and temporary structures. Two early significant appearances of architects onstage in Athenian theatre were uncovered in Lisa Landrum's 2010 doctoral thesis, "Architectural Acts: Architect-Figures in Athenian Drama and Their Prefigurations", and her 2013 essay "Ensemble Performances: Architects and Justice in Athenian Drama" which references Aristophanes' *Peace* and Euripides' *Cyclops*. In each case the characters described as architects are not engaged in building or construction, but are seeking to act justly and further a common good while enmeshed in complex situations with foreigners. Finally, the evidence of architects working offstage in the sanctuary of the theatre, explained in Eric Csapo's 2007 essay "The Men Who Built the Theatres: Theatropolai, Theatronai, and Arkhitektones", are combined with inscriptions to again locate *xenía*. Together these examples outline the varied moral and material expectations of architects, and elucidate one of architecture's foundational ethical virtues.

Xenía

Xenía was a long established ethical custom of the ancient Greek world. None of the extant forms of the Greek word *xenía* (*ξείνία*) have a direct translation into English—instead we find host, donor, guest, friend, foreigner, stranger, mercenary, and simply ‘man’ or ‘you’ as the nearest equivalents. None adequately captures *xenía*’s ancient Greek meaning, and nor does the English cognate. The prefix of ‘xen’ in *xenía* is seen elsewhere in English with *xenophilia* and *xenophobia*, both of which bear a negative connotation. In ancient Greek, *xenía* was benign and pervasive, as Herman (1996) explained, bringing to mind a fellow traveler, not a foreign adversary.

The concept of *xenía* may be translated as hospitality, however the Latin root from which the words host and guest are derived, draw attention to the separation of giver and receiver. *Xenía* equalises the guest and the host. A clear example occurs in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*. Blind and destitute, Oedipus appealed for aid from Theseus, who duly replied,

[...] never would I turn aside from a stranger [*ξένῃς*], such as you are now, or refuse to help in his deliverance. For I know well that I am a man [*ξένον*], and that my portion of tomorrow is no greater than yours. (262–267)

As well as a pervasive ethical disposition, *xenía* also described a personal relationship between adults from different social and geographical groups who perform filial obligations, typically hosting and the exchange of gifts. Strangers, henceforth *xénoi*, from different cities meet either by introduction or through a service or gift, like providing help to a shipwreck survivor, which as Herman wrote, “put the beneficiary in a state of indebtedness, from which state the beneficiary could only redeem himself by a display of submission and loyalty” (1987: 48–49).

In broad strokes, strangers are *xénoi* to each other, though in a civic context, *xénoi* are people who visit a city and need to be hosted. In *Laws*, Plato described four kinds of *xénoi*, all especially sacred (1.632d). Two kinds of *xénoi* come as ambassadors from other communities and must be hosted by appropriately senior officials; *xénoi* who visit for festivals should be hosted at the temples where “priests and temple-keepers must show them care and attention”, and seasonal travellers who come to trade must be hosted at the “markets, harbours, and public buildings” by city officials (12.952d–953d).

Two of Plato’s *xénoi*, the visiting officials and the *xénoi* who visit for festivals, attend the theatre. The evidence of *xenía* in the theatre will be explained after noting how the architecture for these seasonal traders appeared at the intersection of a larger political debate between civic and residential architecture.

Accommodating *xénoi*

Much of the accommodation for visiting *xénoi* included commercial hostels and private homes. Visiting *xénoi* from any of Plato’s groups might have found accommodation for themselves in hostels. These buildings have been described by B. A. Ault in “Housing the poor and homeless in Ancient Greece”, and include hostels resembling stoas, a hostel and bath complex appropriately named “*Xenon*”, and hostels in sanctuaries known as *katagógia*—some of which Ault thought to have hosted “officials of some sort” (2005: 152).

Looking to the hosting of *xénoi* in residential architecture and noting a surprising phenomenon, the connection between architects and houses is missing from the earliest Greek literature. While side remarks by Plato and Xenophon confirm the existence of architecture as a business, residential architecture is far from certain (Plato *Lovers*: 135c; Plato *Gorgias*: 455b; Xenophon *Memorabilia*: 4.2.10). A sense that the absence is not accidental can be felt in the *Economics*, where Aristotle tells us that householders considered the construction and maintenance of their home as their own business, extending into the hosting of visiting *xénoi* (1.1345a).

Centuries later, Vitruvius noted the emergence of *beautiful* homes in ancient Greece, by which he probably meant *architecturally designed* homes. These residences were permitted only if public business were carried out there (6.5.2). Clarifying, he praised households that did not engage architects. Vitruvius reiterated this preference in beginning his book on residential architecture with a shipwreck anecdote, reminding the reader of *xenia*. In the anecdote, when a shipwrecked philosopher finds a town with splendid public architecture, naturally there are educated people there ready to assist his return home. When the philosopher's companions set out ahead of him, they asked of what message to send his children. The philosopher replied by saying that, unlike a shipwreck, the best gift one can give children is invulnerable, proclaiming "education" as that gift. The context of his anecdote implies something far more specific. Vitruvius was beginning his book on residential architecture with the polite reminder that the best communities produce great public architecture, not great houses (6. Introduction).¹ In his anecdote, Vitruvius echoed a sentiment famously expressed by one of ancient Athens' most distinguished orators, Demosthenes. Looking back to earlier and nobler times, Athens was,

[...] wealthy and splendid, but in private life no man held his head higher than the multitude. Here is the proof that [...] the sort of house that [...] those distinguished men of old lived in [...] is no grander than the common run of houses. On the other hand, both the structure and the equipment of their Public buildings were on such a scale and of such quality that no opportunity of surpassing them was left to coming generations. Witness those gate-houses, docks, porticoes, the great harbour, and all the edifices with which you see our city adorned. (23.206–208)²

To support his claim, Demosthenes specified the same buildings Plato required for seasonal trading *xénoi*: "gate-houses, docks, porticoes, the great harbour" (n.d). What Demosthenes and Vitruvius described is a curious and unfortunate descent. The need for an ethical principle that functioned like *xenia* did not change, but private homes became more luxurious, and the architecture devoted to these trading *xénoi* fell into disrepair.

Architects of *xenia* in the theatre: i. Aristophanes' *Trygaeus* and Euripides' *Odysseus* play architect

The other associations between *xenia* and architecture, beyond accommodation and contemporary conceptions of architecture, occurred in the Athenian theatre. Two instances of characters acting as architects identified by Landrum occur in Aristophanes' *Peace* and Euripides' *Cyclops*. As will be shown, *xenia* appears in each, intensified in opposing ways.

Aristophanes' *Peace*, the comic final act appending a trilogy of tragedies, according to A. W. Pickard-Cambridge's *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, was performed for the theatre competitions at the City Festival of Dionysus, or simply the Dionysia (1953: 64). Aristophanes' use of a form of the word ἀρχιτέκτων refers to the political and social events of the day, especially Athens' engagement in the Peloponnesian War. Contemporary historian, Thucydides, wrote that negotiations for what would eventually become known as the Peace of Nicias extended into the Dionysia of 421B.C.E. (V. 20). During the festival's suspension of regular life, Aristophanes debuted his comedy, *Peace*.

In the plot, a farmer named Trygaeus travels to the heavens to plead with Zeus to end the war with Sparta. Trygaeus soon learns from Zeus' messenger Hermes that the goddess *Peace* has been imprisoned by Ares in a nearby cave. Seizing his opportunity, Trygaeus tries to rescue her. Realising the scale of his task, Trygaeus calls on all the Greeks to assist him, and they arrive as a chorus. With our notion of *xenía* and *xénoi* established earlier, Trygaeus' full supporting cast were comprised of "farmers who traveled by sea, carpenters, handicraftsmen, denizens, *xénoi* [ξένοι] and islanders" (Aristophanes: 297). Excited at this opportunity, the workers fill their time with dance and song, but when the heavy labour of removing the large boulders begins, the disorganised group achieve almost nothing. The men then appeal to Trygaeus using the word "architect" as a verb and imperative. In Landrum's translation, "So, if it is necessary for us to do anything, direct us and architect" (2010: 19; Aristophanes: 305). Trygaeus directs and organises the groups, *Peace* is freed, and Trygaeus returns to Athens with appropriate ritual and celebration in the play's celebratory final act.

In "Performing *Theōria*: Architectural Acts in Aristophanes' *Peace*", Landrum sees Trygaeus' journey as a mirror of the audience's experience of the Dionysia. In *theōria* one takes a journey and encounters new ways of thinking, "not only beholding divine spectacles at an involved distance, but also participating directly in a rich variety of interrelated social, political, and religious activities: such as intermingling with strangers; conducting diplomatic exchange." (Landrum 2013a: 32). The process of *theōria*, of surrounding oneself with *xénoi*, depicted onstage and occurring as the communal *theōria* of the audience, heightens the sense of *xenía*. Furthermore, Aristophanes' inclusion of *xénoi* in the chorus reinforces their inclusion within the community.

Like *Peace*, Euripides' *Cyclops* was the final comic act following a trilogy of tragedies performed at the Dionysia.³ The play retells the story of Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemus, the *Cyclops* well known to the Athenian audience from Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus and a few men arrive on a small island seeking food and fresh water—the archetypical *xenía* moment. When Odysseus arrives on the island, Euripides' account differs immediately from Homer's, with Odysseus encountering friendly satyrs before returning to Homer's version where Odysseus and his men are captured. Unlike Homer's version, Odysseus appeals directly to "Zeus Xenios [Ζεῦ ξένι]... look upon these things" (Euripides: 354).⁴ Odysseus asks the assistance of the satyrs to overcome the *Cyclops*, in Landrum's translation, "Be silent now—for you know my scheme completely—and when I command, be persuaded (to follow) the architects" (2010: 134; Euripides: 477–8). When the moment arrives, the satyrs withdraw in comedic fear, but heroic Odysseus blinds the *Cyclops* and makes good their collective escape.

Between *Peace* and *Cyclops*, Athens had renewed its war with Sparta, and suffered catastrophic losses. Homer doesn't name the island of the *Cyclops*, nor clearly describe its location. Euripides sets Odysseus' landing at the foot of Mount Aetna on the island of Sicily. For the audience, this would have brought to mind a disaster that happened in Sicily seven years earlier. Responding to their Sicilian ally's request for assistance against the attacking Syracusans, the Athenians broke the Peace of Nicias and set out to Sicily. Within two years, the entire expedition, over 10,000 soldiers and 200 triremes with their oarsmen, had been killed (Thucydides: VI–VII). This was the largest armed force the Athenians ever assembled and their largest loss. Contemporary historian Thucydides wrote that 7000 captured Athenian and Sicilian soldiers were imprisoned in a quarry cut into the earth, abandoned and left to die (VII, 87). It is in this gruesome context that Euripides retold the story of Odysseus and *Cyclops* trapping and eating his men in a cave on the side of Mt Aetna in Sicily. The consolidation of a link to *xenía* from *Peace* and *Cyclops* mirrors this aspect of Athens' changing military successes, and sends a message to the audience that the Syracusans are not *xénoi*.

As a metonym for enacting *xenía*, Odysseus' instruction to the satyrs is an amusing turn of phrase, simple and common enough to avoid confusing or disturbing the satyrs. And finally, like Trygaeus, by acting on *xenía*, Odysseus acknowledges that his *xénoi*, in this case the satyrs, belong to his immediate community.

Architects of *xenía* in the theatre: ii. the sanctuary of the theatre's elected architect

Depending on inclination and timeliness, three of the *xénoi* Plato mentioned likely attended the theatre. Plato indirectly specified one: many of the “*xénoi* who visit for festivals” would come for the Dionysia. The employment of architects in overseeing hostels as part of sanctuaries, or *katagógia* as noted by Ault above, is likely. Finally, the evidence of architects located in the sanctuary of the theatre refers to a figure who routinely acted according to *xenía*.

The theatre architects and some of their duties are seen across the following sources. An inscription documents an architect being instructed, under the influence of *xenía*, to assign theatre seats for a guest at the Dionysia (Mc.K 1974: 322–3). Posed as a rhetorical question, Demosthenes directed an almost identical request at Aeschines about how he handled a group of Macedonian ambassadors, “[should I have] ordered the architect not to give them reserved seats in the theatre?” (18 28).⁵ The corresponding speech by Aeschines reveals that such accommodations in the sanctuary of Dionysus were not at the discretion of the architect, but of the senate: Demosthenes had “moved in the senate to assign seats in the theatre for the Dionysia to the ambassadors” (2.55).

A similar example is found in an inscription honouring Kallias of Sphettos with an assigned seat in the front row at the new stone theatre: “he shall have a front seat at all the contests which the city holds, and that the duly elected architect in charge of sanctuaries shall assign him the front seat” (SEG 28, 60, II. 96–9; Shear 1978: 6).

While stone-carved *stelai* record politically significant *xénoi*, namely those ‘strangers’ assigned privileged theatre seats, there is little evidence of the many other *xénoi* visiting the city, sitting further away from the stage during the busy

days of the Dionysia. These “elected architects in charge of sanctuaries” likely gave hospitality to visiting *xénoi*, overseeing both the construction of the theatre and perhaps many other short-term amenity buildings. However, as Csapo explained, architects only appear in records about the theatre after it was built in stone, extending a general trend throughout the ancient literature that, although architects are described as leading groups and selecting sites, the building material associated with their special skills is stone (2007: 98). So, besides whatever *xénoi* the sanctuaries’ existing masonry buildings could accommodate, the architect’s role in the erection and dismantling of temporary timber structures remains unclear.

Conclusion

As Athens grew from town to city, it became increasingly diverse, and the separation between foreigner and local, which *xenía* honoured, became ever more difficult to distinguish. With each passing century, *xenía* became more of an antiquated notion, perhaps reminiscent of nobler, and certainly simpler, times. However, though the distinctions of *xenía* become more difficult to discern, *xenía* is a principle addressing constant human needs and recognises both the vulnerability of travelling and a community’s need of peaceful and profitable relationships with foreign guests.

In the two instances of architecting on stage, the presence of *xenía* in each situation is easily recognised. By way of a verb, Trygaeus ‘architects’ *xénoi*, directed them to assist in producing *Peace* as the essential political premise. Aristophanes meanwhile has Hermes remind us of producing architecture (605–18), and where Trygaeus directs his community towards peace, Odysseus enforces *xenía* through violence, justified by his imminent danger. In each case, the architect organises labour into projects for the collective good that they would not otherwise accomplish. As Landrum noted, these protagonists “are each qualified as ‘architect’ while acting as an exemplary proponent of justice, peace and social order” (2013b: 254).

While reflection on *xenía* and different *xénoi* may assist a designer today in acknowledging otherwise voiceless users of public and private architecture, there remain systemic problems. As the ancient Greeks saw, *xenía* unambiguously mandated altruism towards the archetypically abject shipwreck survivor, but this group is so rare that it did not need mentioning in Plato’s *Laws*. The virtuous cycles of hosting and being hosted function smoothly enough for ambassadors and foreign friends, and the sanctuary of the theatre extended itself towards *xénoi* in many ways. Yet perhaps due to a portion of political moral self-licensing, some *xénoi* remained in abjection. Combining Demosthenes’ observation with Plato’s categories of *xénoi*, Demosthenes and Vitruvius found fault in the city officials who neglected the architecture for *xénoi* without ambassadorial status or friends at their destination, that is, *xénoi* with neither political power nor advocacy. They imply in earlier years that architects and officials knew to be vigilant in respecting *xénoi* through all kinds of architecture. This marks the one piece of education Vitruvius reminded his readers was most valuable, and one thing that truly survives a shipwreck.

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Endnotes

¹For an overview: Weir, S. (2015) *Xenía in Vitruvius' Greek house*. *Journal of Architecture* 20, 5.

²Also: Demosthenes, *Olynthiac* 3.25.

³The date of the performance of Euripides' *Cyclops*, is disputed. See: O'Sullivan, (2012).

Scholarship is divided between two plausible dates during the Peloponnesian War, 424 B.C.E. and 408 B.C.E., either a few years before, or thirteen years after Aristophanes' *Peace*. The earlier date sets this satyr play as the fourth act of Euripides' *Hecuba*, which also features Odysseus and a villain who is blinded. See The Date of Euripides' *Cyclops*. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 182, 161–172, Seaford (1982) who argues for the later date based on detailed metrical analysis.

⁴*Zeus Xenios* also found in Plato, *Laws* 5.729e–730a, 8.843a & 12.953e; Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 225, 327; Homer has Menelaus invoke Zeus with a lengthier term; Homer, *Iliad*. 13.622–625.

⁵Author's translation, no known English version translates ἀρχιτέκτων as architect.