


# The Balcony as an Urban Element: Threshold, Common World and Rythmanalysis

**Presentation****Author(s):**

[Charitonidou, Marianna](#) 

**Publication date:**

2020-07

**Permanent link:**

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000499062>

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## The Balcony as An Urban Element: Threshold, Common World and Rythmanalysis

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### PROGRESSIVE POSTMODERNITY

*An online event series hosted by IGMA*

Postmodern architecture contains progressive as well as regressive elements, which need to be understood not stylistically but rather politically. On the occasion of this online event series, hosted by IGMA, they will talk about the manifold aspects of this movement and its underlying politics with their guests. Leading up to this conversation, they will revisit their previous talk „[Facing Covid-19 – \(Politics of\) Elements of Architecture](#)“ (with Marianna Charitonidou and Andrea Bagnato).

[Dr. Ir Marianna Charitonidou](#) is investigating the architectural element of the balcony. The project is being conducted at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (GTA, Prof. Tom Avermaete, ETH Zürich) and is a continuation of Rem Koolhaas' project [‘The Elements of Architecture’](#) (Biennale 2014).

Stuttgart Talks on Architecture (SToA) is an event series organized by the IGMA Institute for Principles of Modern Architecture (Design and Theory), University of Stuttgart. Concept developed by Prof. Dr. Stephan Trüby & M.A. Philipp Krüpe (IGMA)

SToA Stuttgart Talks: Facing Covid-19 – (Politics of) Elements of Architecture

Hosted by Stephan Trüby and Philipp Krüpe

20 May 2020 and 17 July 2020

**Video of the event:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j\\_XTuaJr\\_vk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_XTuaJr_vk)

### Introduction

To start, it would be interesting to refer to the etymology of the word 'balcony'. 'Balcone' derived from 'balco', which in old Italian means 'scaffold', and 'one', which is an augmentative suffix. It means big scaffold. Balconies differ from their cousins, terraces (because they are cantilevered), and viewing platforms (because they are attached to dwellings). The "Balcony" was one of the elements that was investigated in the Venice Biennale of 2014 curated by Rem Koolhaas, which was devoted to the topic "Elements of Architecture"<sup>1</sup>. The section of the exhibition that was devoted to the 'Balcony' curated by Tom Avermaete was structured around three narrative lines: the first narrative line concerned the political role of the balcony, referring to both its micro-political and macro-political dimension, the second narrative line concerned its focal role, while the third narrative line concerned its liminal role.

The political role of the balcony became evident in the case of the "renunciation" speech by Eva Perón in Buenos Aires and the first address of the liberated Mandela at the Cape Town City Hall in 1990 among other cases. The second narrative line, which concerned the focal role of the balcony, included a full-size model of a Haussmannian balcony, which should be understood in conjunction with the bourgeois public sphere in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. The Haussmannian balcony was confronted with the modernist transparency of the Bauhaus at Dessau and an Algerian balcony by Fernand Pouillon in which vernacular and modern definitions of the public sphere coincide. The third narrative line of the section of the exhibition devoted to the balcony concerned the liminal role of the balcony and included an ensemble of photographs of collective housing projects. Its objective was to render explicit the capacity of the balcony to articulate the interior and the exterior, the private and the public, the individual and the collective. It paid special attention to its informality and to its capacity to function as an in-between articulating the private and public realms. The exhibition intended to shed light not only on the spatial characteristics of the balcony, but most importantly on its different cultural appropriations and its experiential complexity. The exhibition also included a prototype of a *mashrabiya*, which is an architectural element which is characteristic of Arabic residences. It is a type of projecting oriel window enclosed with carved wood latticework located on the second story of a building or higher, often lined with stained glass.

The life in the balcony is an important aspect of the quotidian life in the Mediterranean cities. As Bernardo Zacka remarks that "[t]he genius of the balcony is to assemble people who live within proximity, but who are otherwise strangers, around a common world of events, experiences and issues"<sup>2</sup>. The very force of the experience of the balcony lies in its in-betweenness, that is to say in the fact that it combines privacy and publicity, as well as interiority and exteriority. The degree of its publicity and exteriority varies from culture to culture. I could refer, for instance, to the architectural element called *mashrabiya*. Beginning in the Middle Ages, enclosed *mashrabiya* balconies with ornate latticework were built across much of the Arab world to allow residents to enjoy the fresh breeze while adhering to Islamic laws of privacy.

In Ancient Greece, the houses had timber balconies that looked towards the atrium, which was the main source of light towards the interior spaces of the houses. In Ancient Rome, in the Forum, noble spectators had their seats on the balconies (*maeniana*). A *maenianum* was a balcony or gallery for spectators at a public show in ancient Rome. In the Renaissance, balustraded balconies

became a fixture of many Italian buildings after architect Donato Bramante unveiled the design of his bannister-bound Palazzo Caprini in Rome. Another architectural element that shares some characteristics with the balcony is the loggia, which is a covered exterior gallery or corridor usually on an upper level, or sometimes ground level. The outer wall is open and is usually supported by a series of columns or arches. Loggias can be located either on the front or side of a building and are not meant for entrance but as an out-of-door sitting room. From the early Middle Ages, nearly every Italian *comune* had an open arched loggia in its main square, which served as a symbol of communal justice and government and as a stage for civic ceremony.

During the days of the quarantine due to the COVID-19, the balcony acquired a dominant role in our quotidian life because it is the architectural component that allows the citizens to have access to the public sphere. In order to grasp its significance in our everyday lives, it would be useful to refer to three notions: that of the threshold, that of the common world, and that of 'rhythmanalysis'. Firstly, I will draw upon Aldo Van Eyck's approach, to shed light on the notion of the threshold. Secondly, the concept of 'common world' is understood here as Hannah Arendt defined it in her seminal book *The Human Condition*<sup>3</sup>. Finally, to analyse the notion of 'rhythmanalysis', I will focus on the way Henri Lefebvre understands this notion in his book entitled *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*<sup>4</sup>, which was originally published as *Éléments de rythmanalyse: introduction à la connaissance des rythmes* in 1992<sup>5</sup>.

Balconies are places open to contingency, where people gather to witness events in common. Balconies have the capacity to put citizens along with their neighbours before matters of common concern. Balconies "transform residential buildings into a public *in potential*"<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, balconies act as liminal spaces that bridge public and private life. Henri Lefebvre notes, in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*: "In order to grasp this fleeting object, which is not exactly an object, it is therefore necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside. A balcony does the job admirably, in relation to the street, and it is to this putting into perspective (of the street) that we owe the marvellous invention of balconies [...] from which one dominates the road and passers-by"<sup>7</sup>.

In the case of the balcony, architecture fosters common knowledge. In order to better grasp the status of this common knowledge, we could refer to what Hannah Arendt called "common world". In her seminal book entitled *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that common sense is crucial because it constitutes "a kind of sixth sense through which all particular sense data, given by the five senses, are fitted into a common world, a world which we can share with others, have in common with others"<sup>8</sup>. As Jon Nixon notes, in his book entitled *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship*, "[f]or Arendt the world is neither entirely 'in our heads' nor entirely 'out there'. It is the intersubjective space within which we relate to one another through our five senses - hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch - and in so doing constitute our common world"<sup>9</sup>.

According to Bernardo Zacka, "balconies may be nominally private, but they are just as much a continuation of the public realm up in the air"<sup>10</sup>. To better understand the role of the balconies in maintaining the sense of the public realm up in the air during the days of the pandemic, we could bring to mind David Harvey's following remark regarding the impact of the daily life on how we

understand our political praxis and our role in the world, in his text entitled “The Political Economy of Public Space”: “We do not, after all, experience the city blankly, and much of what we do absorb from daily life in the city [...] surely has some kind of influence on how we are situated in the world and how we think and act politically within it”<sup>11</sup>. The experience of the quotidianity in the balcony contributes significantly to the production and what Arendt calls “common world”. For Arendt, the common world is the very human condition.

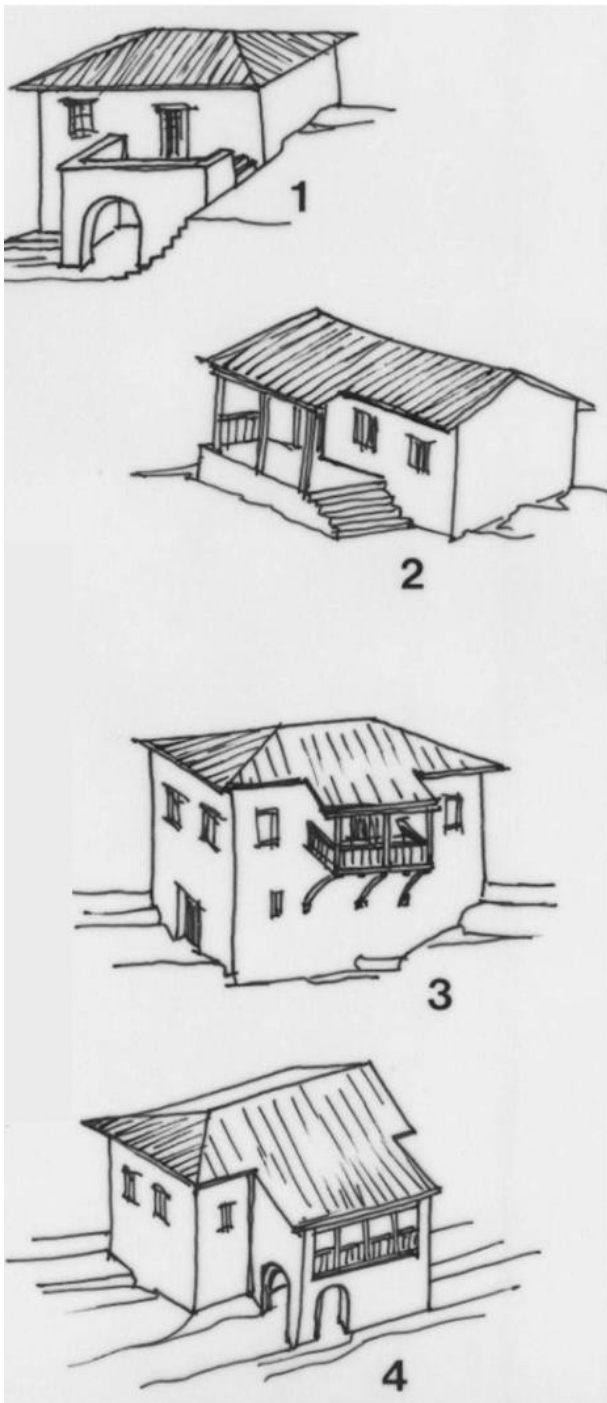
### **The Spatial Specificities of the Balcony: The *Polykatoikia* Balcony in Greece**

In order to grasp the specificity of the Greek balconies one should interpret them within the context of the emergence of the typology of the so-called ‘polykatoikia’, which in Greek means multi-residence (πολυκατοικία, from πολυ-, meaning multiple, and -κατοικία, meaning residence). The birth of ‘polykatoikia’ is closely related to the need to respond to the great increase of Athens’ population due to the arrival of the refugees from Asia Minor after the defeat of the Greek army in August 1922 and the so-called “Great Fire of Smyrna” in September 1922<sup>12</sup>.

Despite the fact that balconies and especially their use in repetition such as in the facades of ‘polykatoikies’ became a point of reference of the facades of the residential buildings in Greece in the twentieth century (fig. 1), the construction of balconies in Greece date back to Ancient Greece. Since their first occurrences, balconies were conceived as devices aiming at satisfying needs related to hygiene through the increase of air circulation and the enhancement of natural light to a building's interior. Later, wooden balconies were also used in certain typologies of residential buildings of vernacular architecture in the islands of Cyclades and Dodecanese and elsewhere in Greece. These balconies, which also served mostly hygiene purposes, were often made of *katráni*, a type of cedar imported from Asia Minor. Additionally, in Peloponnese’s vernacular houses, especially in Messini, Greece, one encounters four main typologies of semi-outdoor spaces of which the three were variations of the typology of balcony (fig. 2).

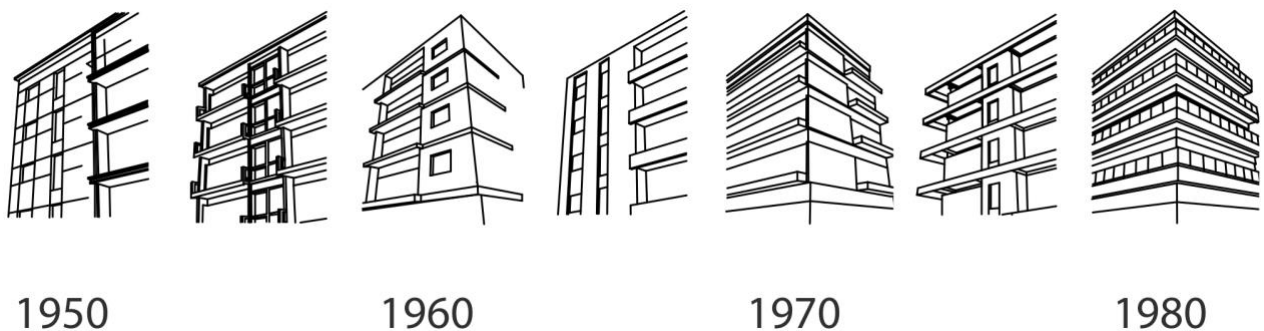


**Figure 1.** Dimitris Pikionis, sketch for a 'polykatoikia' on Heyden Street in Athens completed in 1936. Credits: Modern Greek Architecture Archives (M.G.A.A.), Benaki Museum of Greek Culture (Benaki Museum)



**Figure 2.** Sketches of four main typologies of semi-outdoor spaces found in vernacular houses in Peloponnese, especially in Messini, Greece. Credits: personal archives of Maria Arakadaki for her teaching at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

The 'polykatoikia' model is based on the adoption of the horizontal property law of 1929, which allowed and even promoted the emergence of a system of 'antiparochi': a cashless contract between the owner of a building site and an entrepreneur who would assure rapid construction of the 'polykatoikia' without any financial help from the state and was based on the exchange one's house and building site for one or more flats in the newly-built 'polykatoikia', which would replace the existing building in the site. Thanks to this system, there was a great increase of the building activity, which resulted to the modernization of the Greek cities and offered the possibility to large numbers of citizens to own their own apartments. The system of 'antiparochi' also helped to respond to the necessity of building new 'polykatoikies' to host the new populations of Greek citizens who moved from smaller cities and villages to Athens after the destruction of the former during the Civil War (1946-1949). The construction of 'polykatoikies' was intensified in the late 1950s and reached its peak during the 1960s and 1970s (fig. 3, fig. 4).



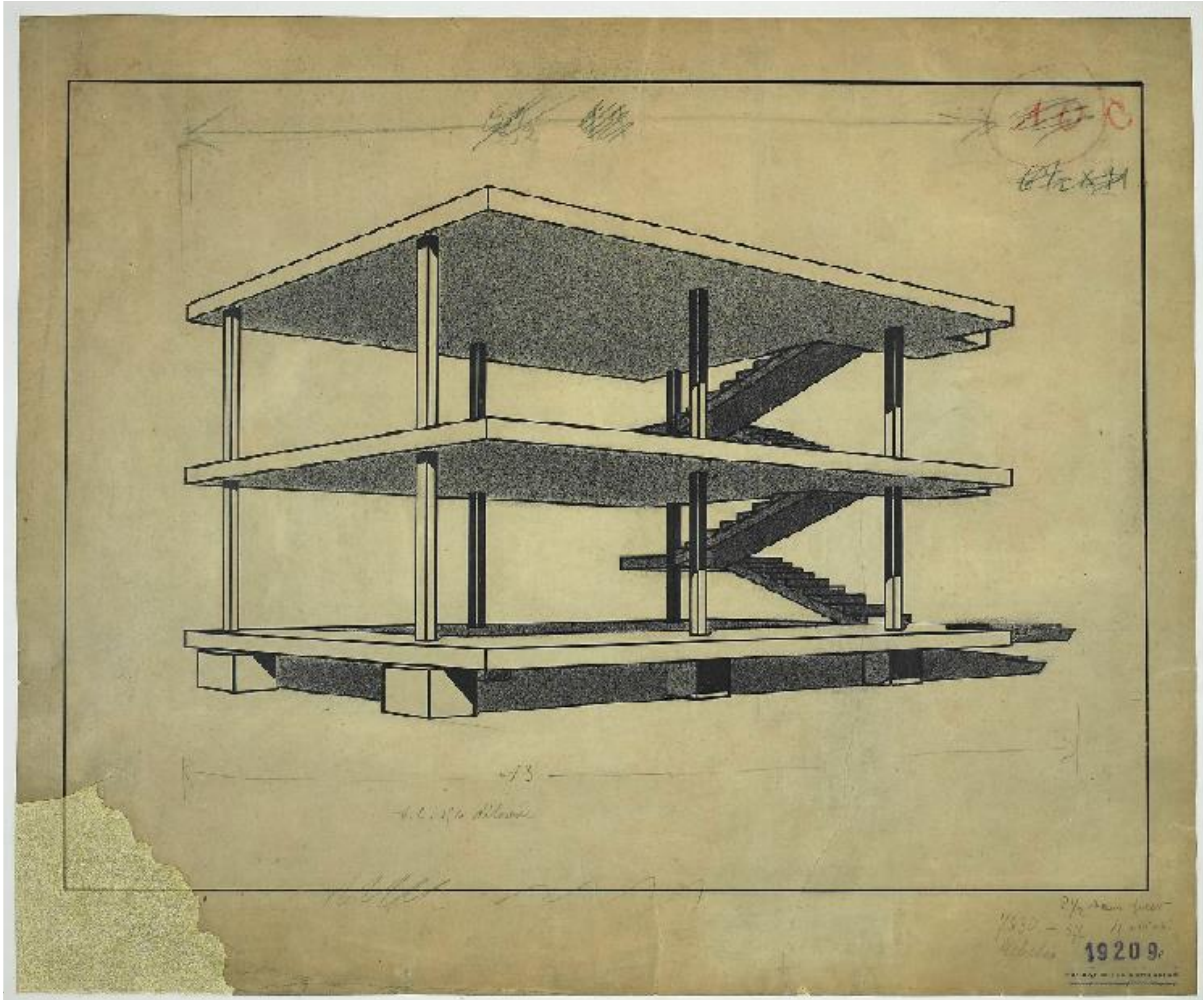
**Figure 3.** Evolution of facades of Greek polykatoikies. After: Anastasia Paschou, Gebäudetypologie der Grossstadt, eine Analyse der griechischen Metropole Athen, ETH Zurich, 2001. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/handle/20.500.11850/147207>. [accessed 04 June 2020]





**Figure 4.** Dimitris Fatouros, drawing for a 'polykatoikia' on 109 Patission Street, Athens, 1957. Credits: Dimitris Fatouros personal archive.

The 'polykatoikia', to a certain extent, morphologically, is an evolution of the Dom-ino system, introduced by Le Corbusier in 1914 (fig. 5). One of the most dominant characteristics of the Greek 'polykatoikies' are their extensive outdoor spaces: the large and repetitive linear balconies, which in many cases are continuous and wrap the facades of the 'polykatoikies' (fig. 6). The size of these balconies is generous compared to that of the balconies of the Haussmannian buildings in Paris with a width of at least two meters in most of the cases. Their size makes them capable of accommodating various activities of the everyday life. They function literally as an extension of the indoor spaces and activities. In most cases, inhabitants place plants, furniture and other home appliances on their balconies. During the warm months of the year the balcony becomes the site of collective family life; of eating, gathering, and entertaining. Contrary to their Parisian counterparts, most of the 'polykatoikies' balconies are equipped with textile sunshades that can be moved up and down with the help of a metal mechanism to adapt to the specific needs of the inhabitants in terms of sun and privacy.



**Figure 5.** Le Corbusier, Dom-ino, 1914. Credits: Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris, FLC 19209A.





**Figure 6.** Photographs of several “polykatoikies” in Palaio Faliro Athens. Photograph taken by Marianna Charitonidou on 8 April 2020

Regarding the post-war reconstruction in Athens and the large urban centers in Greece, a decisive role played a law that was voted in 1947, the so-called «ΚΗ' Ψήφισμα», which concerned the properties that were built privately but for the middle and upper classes and offered an exempt from tax, while the state facilitated the issuance of building permits and the granting of mortgages. The most intensive period regarding the construction of ‘polykatoikies’ in Greece was between 1957 and 1967, during the boom. During that period, the ‘polykatoikia’ became a status symbol and contributed significantly to the modernization of living conditions. Those who migrated to the city found in these large balconies a substitute for the private open-air spaces that they were accustomed to from their rural dwellings, but now situated in the dense urban matrix. The

'polykatoikia' soon became symbolic of Greek modernization thanks to its contribution to the 'hygienisation' of housing, achieved mainly due to the balconies and amenities such as central heating. Nonetheless, the symbolic value of these balconies for their tenants relied upon an understanding of the benefits of sun in a more spiritual way, which aimed to challenge the rigid hygienic symbolism that was attributed to balconies in northern modernist contexts and should be understood within the context of the politics of 'mediterraneity' in Southern Europe<sup>13</sup>. Within the northern modernist contexts, much emphasis was placed on technocratic aspects, through slogans such as "light, air, and openness", while for the Greeks the balconies not only contributed to the improvement of the hygienic conditions of the residential buildings, but also offered access to the spiritual aspects of natural light.

Moreover, the balconies of the Greek 'polykatoikies' contribute significantly to the optimization of the passive heating and cooling strategies. Thanks to their generous size, their vegetation, and their textile sunshades, balconies in Greece have an important impact on the sustainable environmental design of the 'polykatoikies', contributing significantly to the air circulation and to the enhancement of the daylight conditions of the indoor spaces (fig. 7, fig. 8, fig. 9, fig. 10).



**Figure 5.** Photograph of a 'polykatoikia' showing the textile awnings in its balconies in Palaio Faliro Athens. Photograph taken by Marianna Charitonidou on 8 April 2020





**Figure 6.** Photograph of a 'polykatoikia' showing the textile awnings in its balconies in Palaio Faliro Athens. Photograph taken by Marianna Charitonidou on 8 April 2020

The notion of light is, for instance, very dominant in the work of the modernist Greek architect Aris Konstantinidis, whose design approach was based on the combination of primitive and modern techniques and materials under the condition of maintaining contact with nature. Konstantinidis blamed modern architects and modern society for having lost their connection with nature and, through his reference to the notion light, aimed to reinvent the relationship of modern architecture with nature<sup>14</sup>. To better grasp the symbolic and political value of the experience of quotidian life in the balconies, we can think of their contribution to the production and what Hannah Arendt calls 'common world'<sup>15</sup>. Another concept that is useful for understanding the symbolic value of the balconies, especially in Mediterranean cities such as Athens, is that of 'threshold', which "Aldo Van Eyck elaborated [...] as a way to designate physical spaces [...] that connect various spatial and psychological registers within the city"<sup>16</sup>. Van Eyck's conception of the threshold is related to the intention to reconcile spatial polarities such as inside and outside, and private and public. Between the remembrance of a rural pattern of living and the spiritual symbolism of light, the balconies of the 'polykatoikies' obtain a very specific physiognomy.

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<sup>1</sup> Rem Koolhaas et al. *Elements of Architecture*. Cologne: Taschen, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Bernardo Zacka, "An Ode to the Humble Balcony", *The New York Times*, 9 May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/opinion/covid-balconies-architecture.html> [accessed 04 June 2020]

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, translated by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore. London; New York: Continuum, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Éléments de rythmanalyse: introduction à la connaissance des rythmes*. Paris: Editions Syllepse, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Bernardo Zacka, "What's in a Balcony? The In-Between as Public Good", in *Political Theory and Architecture*, eds. Duncan Bell, Bernardo Zacka. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*; See also Jon Nixon, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Nixon, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship*, 126.

<sup>10</sup> Zacka, "What's in a Balcony? The In-Between as Public Good", 98.

<sup>11</sup> David Harvey, "The Political Economy of Public Space", in *The Politics of Public Space*, eds. Setha Low, Neil Smith. New York: Routledge, 2006, 18.

<sup>12</sup> See Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, *Smyrna 1922: The Destruction of a City*. New York: Newmark Press, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Michelangelo Sabatino, "The Politics of Mediterranean in Italian Modernist Architecture", in *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities*, eds. Jean-François Lejeune, Michelangelo Sabatino. London; New York: Routledge, 2010, 47.

<sup>14</sup> See Marianna Charitonidou, "From the Research of a Modernity that Could be Greek to a Multiplicity of the Present: 'Greek-ness' in Architecture or Architecture in Greece?", in *Greek architecture in the 20th and 21st century*, ed. Andreas Giacomacatos. Athens: Gutenberg, 2016, 166-176. See also David Leatherbarrow, *Uncommon Ground: Architecture, Technology and Topography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>16</sup> Zacka, "What's in a Balcony? The In-Between as Public Good", 91.