The vernacular Earthen Building Tradition in Greece. Cultural and Conservation Questions

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In this work a close inspection of the past and the future of the earth buildings is presented in order to propose guidelines for the preservation of this rich architectural heritage.

History
Earth is the most ancient building material in Greece. Many evidences of earthen Neolithic period are well known. Earth has represented the vernacular architecture of Greece millennia later, dating from the Ottoman era (after 1453) to the mid of the 20th century. Fine examples of this architecture are found in Thessaly and Macedonia. Its spread was connected to the local availability of the material needed and the climatic conditions of the place. Different typologies are presenting all over Greece.

Suggestions for the conservation of earthen buildings in Greece

Action for the recognition of earth as building material
A foundation of a Centre of Studies and Research of the Greek Earthen Heritage is needed. This Centre could undertake a certain number of initiatives aimed to demonstrate the precise intention to exploit the historical centres by retaking possession of abandoned materials and techniques. Systematic work (educational campaigns through popular organizations, local authorities and media) is needed in order to reach people - who could benefit from those materials and techniques. The neighbour Balkan countries may increase the field of application of a common policy given that their vernacular earthen heritage is common.

Towards an Earthen Building Code
It has to be verified that earth is a material that corresponds to quality, resistance and durability regulations. The final scope should be the syntax of a special Greek Earthen Building Code taking into account all constrains imposed by the material itself and the region where is applied, as well as the conservation values.

Rehabilitation - An integrated approach of conservation and development
A comprehensive approach of rehabilitation encompasses conservation and development. It must take into account the necessity of improving conditions of day to day life for residents as well as the economic viability.

Modern notions of conservation
The conservation methods concerned “neoclassical style” stone buildings of urban “polite” architecture, while the conservation of earthen buildings did not follow scientific guidelines.

Nowday’s practice
Earthen vernacular buildings are considered related to poor living conditions and inferior social classes. When damages appeared on the earthen walls, the common practice was to demolish them. The repair and maintenance of vernacular heritage has relied in the use of inadequate techniques, with not compatible materials that did not improve the mechanical behaviour of the earthen construction. Consequently, these masonries were considered as inadequate structural systems.

Today efforts
During the last decade researchers of Laboratory of Building Materials at the University of Thessaloniki, work on a large research program for the conservation of earthen architecture and the construction of modern earthen buildings. The program focuses on the material and structural technology of earthen walls, the stabilization, the grouting processes and the conservation of withstanding earthen historical buildings. In collaboration with the Technical Chamber of Greece the Laboratory organises seminars for professionals in order to educate and create a conscience towards earthen buildings.