

The secret side of Athens: How modern art is revitalising the ancient city



Surprises lurk in the scruffy industrial area behind Piraeus port CREDIT: GETTY

- [Rachel Howard](#), TRAVEL WRITER

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It's a typical Wednesday evening in Retsina, the scruffy industrial area behind Piraeus port. Traffic snarls up the backstreets, where mechanics smoke on plastic armchairs outside their workshops. Dockworkers pause for a beer on their way home. But one street has been cordoned off for a street party. The aroma of souvlaki grilling in a food truck mingles with the whiff of WD40 in a machine shop, glowing moodily under red spotlights. Bottles tinkle in coolers outside Paleo wine bar. Psychedelic armchairs made from flotsam and jetsam populate Rodeo, a gallery in a barely repurposed warehouse. Women in extravagant frocks pose with white balloons printed with portraits of cats at The Intermission gallery, which is celebrating its opening night. Welcome to the art scene in Athens, a city emerging from financial ruin to forge a new identity based on its oldest commodity: culture.

“Athens is a peripheral city, but this is the new metropolis,” Stamatia Dimitrakopoulos pronounces. In a puff-sleeved poplin blouse and black jeans, streaked blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, 28-year-old Dimitrakopoulos looks more like an art student than the artistic director of Art Athina, one of Europe's oldest art fairs. On the eve of the fair, we are drinking iced coffee in the September sunshine outside the Zappeion hall, a neoclassical landmark in the National Garden.



The Intermission gallery

“Art professionals from abroad are always surprised by how vivid the art scene here is,” Dimitrakopoulos tells me. “There’s a kind of excitement in Athens that I haven’t seen anywhere else. And it’s getting more international every day. I know at least five artists who came to Athens for residencies and ended up living here.” It’s not just foreign artists who are attracted by the affordable rents, great weather, and the thrill of living among so many glorious ancient monuments. “Young Greeks are also coming back to find their space here,” she says. “There’s still land to plant your seed – and things are happening so fast, you can see it flourishing.”

Formidably self-assured, Dimitrakopoulos encapsulates the possibilities that Athens offers; she returned from Los Angeles to her home city in 2013 and took over Art Athina aged 26. She also runs Mum Social Club, a monthly book, cooking, and pottery club in the 5,400 sq ft studio owned by Jannis Varelas, her fiancé and one of Greece’s most successful artists. (The night before, Varelas opened his solo show at the Benaki Museum’s Pireos 138 outpost, a huge space with a free-ranging roster of modern art, architecture, and photography exhibitions.)

An immersive antidote to the air kisses and small talk of gallery openings, Mum Social Club symbolises the rebirth of Kypseli. Once the bastion of the Athenian bourgeoisie, this downtown neighbourhood fell on hard times in the early Nineties. As the well-to-do locals moved to suburbia, the first wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Africa settled into the Bauhaus buildings, Sixties flats, and ravaged (but ravishing) early 20th-century town houses. Now artists are moving in, too – along with property developers from China and Israel, hungry to capitalise on Airbnb and Greece’s “Golden Visa” scheme for investors.



Zappeion hall CREDIT: GETTY

“To see contemporary art in Athens, you really have to wear comfortable shoes because you have to walk a lot,” says Kiriakos Spirou, an art critic and composer who lives in Kypseli. Soft-spoken Spirou is the quietly prolific founder of Und. Athens, an online journal and map of the alternative art scene in the city. With self-guided walks to help you navigate the most happening areas, the map includes everything from “non-spaces” like artzines and collectives, to open studios (from silk-screen printers to bookbinders), as well as commercial galleries and cultural institutions. Since many artist-run spaces and pop-up exhibitions are only open by appointment, I have enlisted Spirou to take me on an art walk around his neighbourhood.

We rendezvous on circular Agios Georgios Square, which thrums with toddlers on scooters and off-duty actors. Our first stop is the Zarifi residence. Built in 1924, the house had been dormant for decades (apart from the rembetiko club on the first floor) until curator Kostas Prapoglou stumbled upon it. For his current show, Prapoglou invited 20 artists to create site-specific works exploring urban decay and regeneration.

He leads me up the sinuous marble stairs, past a translucent tapestry filtering out the sunlight, into room after room of intriguing installations: black and white photographs masked by delicate stitching, jute flowers sprouting in the desiccated rock garden on the roof terrace. The most poignant work is a wall of grinning Chinese “lucky cats”, waving rolled up banknotes, lined up against a backdrop of cheap oriental wallpaper.



Rodeo, a gallery in a barely repurposed warehouse CREDIT: STATHIS MAMALAKIS

“A Chinese company offered the owner a lot of money to turn the building into a boutique hotel, but he refused,” Prapoglou says with a wry smile. “There are at least 300 Airbnb properties in Kypseli. But the diversity of the area is amazing. There’s even a community of Icelandic artists. It’s shaping into a totally different landscape and humanscape.”

The exhibition extends to four satellite sites around Kypseli: an empty grocery store, a vacant basement that has been turned into a darkroom, a non-profit organisation that provides books to refugees, and a Catholic church, where a documentary about the area’s Afro-Greeks is accompanied by the Nigerian congregation choir.

Sculptor Avgoustos Veinoglou was one of the first locals to appropriate empty spaces for art. In 2012, at the height of Greece’s economic crisis, he set up Snehta, the first artist residency programme in Athens. Ninety-seven artists from 13 countries have since stayed in the Kypseli flat where Veinoglou’s father grew up. Snehta recently launched workshops in woodwork, sculpture, ceramics, and weaving, and is developing an online shop to help artists sell their work.

“There’s no public funding for the arts and private initiatives are limited,” says Veinoglou, who is replastering the Snehta studio when we show up. This DIY attitude is what makes the Athens art community so engaging and accessible. Every building is a potential canvas for graffiti artists, who have turned whole neighbourhoods, including Exarchia and Psirri, into giant murals. Some street artists, such as Hope and Cacao Rocks, have become commercial success stories.



The Zarifi residence CREDIT: KOSTAS PRAPOGLOU

Collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos's Neon Foundation has also helped bring contemporary art into public life, commissioning ambitious shows in hidden spaces and historical sites, ranging from a car park to the ancient Agora. For Neon's latest City Project, photographer Panos Kokkinias has installed monumental tableaux of Athens's chaotic cityscape in the abandoned offices of the National Bank of Greece, alongside street portraits and stock images that present an unfiltered, unsettling version of everyday life in the city. One of the most arresting images shows a pack of stray dogs poised outside the empty husk of Emst, the National Museum of Contemporary Art, which remains closed after 20 years of false starts.

Stepping up to fill this void – after its own fitful, 30-year gestation – is the Basil and Elise Goulandris Foundation Museum, which opened last Wednesday. This private collection reflects the personal (and very expensive) taste of the late shipping magnate and his wife, who filled their many homes with 800 precious objects and artworks by the likes of Monet and Miro, Picasso and Van Gogh. There are 180 of these modern masterpieces on permanent display in Athens. The 11-storey museum, plonked on top of a neoclassical building, also contains a small collection of contemporary Greek art, which will slowly be enriched with new acquisitions. But of all these great works, it's the view from the fourth-floor terrace that steals the show: there's the Parthenon, poking out between a tangle of TV aerials. No matter how many young artists paint this town red, the antiquities never get old.



Views from The Perianth, a Thirties landmark

Getting there

Aegean Airlines, British Airways, easyJet, Wizz Air and Ryanair all fly to Athens.

Staying there

The Perianth, a Thirties landmark with contemporary Greek art, at Agia Irini Square. Doubles from €150 (£133).

Where to eat and drink

Paleo, set in a warehouse in Piraeus, serves unpretentious Mediterranean dishes (39 Polidefkous).

Au Revoir in Kypseli is a tiny Fifties time-warp and an Athens favourite (136 Patission Ave).