

# Acquiring Industrial Archives. Reviewing the Greek example

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### Abstract:

**Purpose** - In an era that any information is searched and understood in a digital environment there is still workload to be taken on a physical basis. Small and larger corporations keep abandoning their archives in dark storerooms. In order to bring these stories into the light of history and to broaden the available sources for researchers this article describes the efforts taken on the acquisition and preservation of industrial archives in Greece and discusses the steps that young archivists could follow for enriching business archives deposits.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The text recounts different efforts of managing industrial archives (acquisition, appraisal). This paper is mainly a retrospective that aims to summarize different cases in order to uncover the challenges of this field for young archivists.

One of this text's assets is the discussion about the ways that the archival community has dealt with business archives and what could be done in terms of archives management policy. This article will prove useful to young archivists interested in the process of preserving historical business archives and managing future accruals.

**Index Terms** — Acquisition, Industry, Business Archives, Archival Heritage, Archival Policy

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s architects and historians introduced the interdisciplinary field of industrial archaeology to the Greek research community. Schools of Architecture started discussing the modern forms and design principles of industrial buildings, while industrial heritage specialists constituted in 1992 the Greek Department of the International Committee for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage (TICCIH). In the 1990s cultural heritage and related issues was a matter left in the hands of activist researchers. Uniting forces under one scientific club seemed the only way to persuade public servants and institutions for the social and economic value of these remnants. At the same time, researchers and engineers interested in historical machinery walked into various abandoned factories in search for various remnants of a productive period. In certain cases, they came across with piles of boxes including documents, accounting books, photographs and technical drawings and succeeded in preserving large

industrial archives.

The young and small community of Greek archivists at that time left no other choice to engineers and historians but for urgent action. Thus, a scientific activism trend arose among researchers fascinated by industrial era and its historical landscape. It is quite possible that the adventurous spirit of industrial archaeology enhanced young researchers' interest. Many corresponded to this call for the preservation of the nation's productive heritage. In these early days of interdisciplinarity, team working must have been quite tempting for young historians, social scientists, conservatists and engineers. Their researches focused on documenting the long forgotten industrial past of Greece and tracing remnants of this activity. The 1990s was the most appropriate time for such a turn as deindustrialization was almost completed in the country. Large firms were transferring their establishments from Athens to its periphery. Architects and historians took active part in acquiring, cataloguing and preserving large units of corporate archives. Such cases are the archives of the French (1875-1989) and the Greek Mining Company (1873-1930), the Industry for Agricultural Fertilizers of Drapetsona (1909-1999), the Retsina Textile Industry (1872-1987) and the Couppas S.A. Machinery (1882-1987) [1, 2, 3]. Not all business archives were treated the same way. In the cases of the French and the Greek Mining Company and the Industry for Agricultural Fertilizers archives were stored for more than two decades. The absence of funding left those collections in the dark. Any archive stored without being indexed falls into oblivion. Similar acquisitions took place in the rest of the country were business archives were located inside abandoned offices and storage houses.

## II. THE HISTORICAL BANK OF GREECE

But these were only some of the total initiatives. Many of the preserved industrial archives in Greece ended in the hands of two Greek banks: The National Bank of Greece and the Piraeus Bank. Both institutions funded the country's postwar industrial development and thus bankrupting industries together with their archives ended in their hands. We should mention at this certain point that Piraeus Bank (ETBA-Investment Bank for Industrial Development at that time) took up the responsibility of managing the postwar Marshall plan. This Plan (officially known as the European Recovery Program-ERP) was an American initiative that aimed at helping western European countries to rebuild their national economies after WWII. The National Bank had interfered already since the Interwar period in funding the industrial sector. Since the end of the Greek Civil War both banks accepted loan requests from old and new companies who wanted to become part of the vision for national rebirth. This activity succeeded in

preserving several documents of business activity in Greece. Due to the absence of any thorough and national registry, bank archives are still one of the most convenient and rich sources for research in economic studies.

As far as the National Archives were concerned, it seems that at that time there was neither any acquisition policy towards private and business archives nor any discussions took place in the public space for an industrial archives depository. Before 1990s the General State Archives were facing many problems in their internal structure and there was no published policy towards archives. Thus, the management of bankrupted businesses and their archives was a matter concerning mainly the Greek banks. In the early 1980s the Historical Archive of the National Bank of Greece was reformed and introduced international practices of archives management. In its depositories large industrial archives were stored along with NBG's institutional archive. The bank's early interest for the national industrial economy and its potentials already since the late 19<sup>th</sup> c. resulted in a large series of files named Industrial Trust. Documents concerning every company's personnel, establishments, mechanical equipment and economic viability were filed in one or more files. The file's size depended on the activities and the operation time of each company. NBG's inspectors submitted one evaluation essay for all these companies that the bank was interested to loan. These evaluations include many useful information about corporate management, advertisement strategy, investment policy and risk management. Today the Industrial Trust series is possibly one of the most trustworthy sources for the documentation of past activities in the country's industrial sector.

### III. THE CASE OF A DE-INDUSTRIALIZED HARBOUR

Greek public institutions had their share in the attempt for acquiring and preserving our late archival heritage. In the port-city of Volos an archival initiative appeared in 1991. It was the same year that the City Board of Volos decided to establish a City Archive, which would be enforced with the task of acquiring, organizing, indexing and preserving public and private archives produced inside the city's boundaries. The Municipal Center for Historical Research and Documentation (DIKI) in approximately 10 years succeeded to acquire large records units from abandoned factories that had operated in Volos. Nowadays its collections involve the archives of textile factories, a unique brick & tile industry, a cotton industry and the local electrical power company. The case of DIKI is possibly one of a kind in the Greek territory that the local authorities decided to take an active part in rescuing the local cultural heritage. This interest for corporate archives was not irrelevant to the City Board's decision to restore and reuse abandoned industrial buildings. The 1990's discussions for preserving industrial heritage brought up the question of how they should cope with large business archives.

In this case the acquisition proved a useful choice for the restoration projects as the architectural drawings of these corporate archives were used by architects in order to restore the buildings to their original form. In other cases of reuse, the restoration of these establishments to industrial

museums was completed based on documents from its business archives. Thus, in the case of Tsalapatas Brick & Tile Museum the preserved by DIKI corporate archives documented its expansions, the technological updates and its decay.

In the same city industrial archives were acquired also by the local Department of the Greek State Archives. The above industries of Volos were active in different sectors (agricultural technology, textile, food, alcohol, commercial etc.). Today the city continues to restore remnants of its industrial past. These archives are the key to the documentation of the city's and its citizens' past. The case of Volos is a successful example of how local initiatives activated public services for preserving the urban past for the sake of the future generations.

### IV. THE PPC CASE

Quite lately another challenging initiative was taken by the Public Power Corporation, as the national electrical energy industry is named since 1950. PPC holds one of the largest preserved industrial archives. Its corporate records testify how energy industry developed in postwar Greece. Before WWII 400 small energy units operated across the country and powered cities and towns. Some archives of these small energy units were transferred to PPC from 1950s and on. Despite PPC's consistent policy of collecting these archives in 1960's, quite a number has been left inside these establishments and ended at the hands of other institutions or individuals.

Today, only a small but significant series out of PPC's huge archive has been arranged and indexed. The documents produced by the General Director's office were organized by its secretaries in files. The archivists had to deal with some major but frequent problems such as the inconsistency between the file's description and its content, the mixture of different documents in one file and unlabeled files. Still, these were not common cases. Most files were classified, and an expert could build the archive's series quite straightforward. The archive's series included topics such as international congresses and co-operations, payroll issues, occupational accidents and prohibition measures, directors' travels, technology transfer, mechanical equipment brochures and leaflets, the construction of hydroelectric stations, mining works and steam-powered production units. There is no doubt that the Director's Office series is one of the most interesting and challenging testimonies of how a large energy industry of public interest was established in post-war Greece. The citizens' letters to PPC concerning the benefits of electricity unveil the lust for technological improvement in postwar southeastern Europe. Apart from large public works and the inhabitants' reaction to them, a researcher may study the State-citizens relations in post-WWII Greece. An intriguing sub-series of files involves the correspondence of Greek citizens asking PPC to hire their relatives due to multiple reasons (victims of political discrimination, social incompetence, economic hardship).

In 2014 the company's Archives Department decided to acquire and transfer in its repositories the postwar archive of Couppas S.A. machinery company. This decision was the

outcome of the industrial archaeology's tuitions that had inspired young scientists in the previous decades. This archive had initially been taken away out of the factory's premises by the National Hellenic Research Foundation's research team.

This industrial archive was removed finally in 2015 out of Sivitanidios School storage rooms to the PPC's establishments in the neighborhood of Kolonos. One year later the process of opening the boxes started. The material was interesting at the first sight as Couppas S.A. had operated for more than a century (1882-1987) in the port city of Piraeus [4]. It was thought to be one of the most innovative and pioneering machine industries in Greece. Apart from the mass production of steam-engines and pumps in the pre-WWII period, during the following decades (1950s-60s) this industry took up some large public works concerning power units in Greece, eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and South Asia. Couppas S.A. was openly involved in the postwar program of launching and expanding the country's electrical network. In 1970s Couppas S.A. introduced the first Greek steamroller.

Couppas S.A. archive is a challenging training opportunity for young archivists and historians as one will have to deal with a vast variety of document types (corporate correspondence, financial accounts, engineering plans, administrative board's records, clients' files etc.). The archive remains enclosed in approximately 1.000 boxes in PPC's establishment. Professional archivists and interns are expected to take up the project of building a corporate archive in PPC from the point it was left. This is a unique opportunity especially now that the company is moving from coal-based production of electricity to eco-friendly renewable forms and all its records will soon need to be appraised, arranged and stored. The arrangement of these archives and the foundation of an archival service under this company could prove another challenge for Greek archivists.

## V. MISFORTUNES

Apart from the aforementioned successful cases of dealing with large corporate archives, there are also some misfortunes that we need to refer to.

Case 1: For almost 10 years the Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation together with the University of Thessaly co-organized a research program that aimed at locating and registering pre-industrial and industrial units that operated in Mt. Pilio in modern times (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> c.). During this program (2000-2010) a group of historians located forgotten and sometimes covered by greenery industrial establishments and their remnants [5]. Most of them had not preserved their mechanical equipment nor written documents of their activities. The research team listed more than 200 mills where neither a document nor a photo surviving from its operation period was preserved.

Case 2: In January 2013 the Industrial Gas Museum gave the Greek public and the visitors of Athens the opportunity to revisit the Greek capital's past and wander into the buildings of an energy unit that inaugurated its operation more than a century ago. Though most of the plant's equipment has been maintained [6], only a few items out of

the company's archive have survived up today. Since 1984 that the Athens Municipal Gasworks Company (as it was renamed, after the French company dropped out in 1937) stopped operating, the premises were sealed till the mid-1990s. During that obscure period, the factory's archive was carried away and no one heard anything of it in the years to come.

Multiple documents from this corporate archive are being traded today by various collectors in the streets of Athens. A little number of documents and some relics have been preserved by the Industrial Gas Museum of Athens, where visitors can have a glance only at memories and individual documents. I should mention here that the factory's archive dated since 1857. The exhibited documents do not form any kind of archive as they had been selected by ex-workers in order to be exhibited.

This story brings in our mind the current state of corporate archival heritage in Greece and what needs to be done [7]. During the current economic crisis, a great number of companies have stopped operating while no one has any information about their archives and how they are handled. Large archival units are still being abandoned inside the corporate establishments as are of little value in comparison to machinery that can be sold for reuse. It is certain that the Greek State has dealt with serious losses as far as it concerns its public and private archives. Thus, the current crisis retains for Greek enterprises the challenge of dealing with their past. Usually, the absence of state provision is to be blamed though this could not be deemed as the main factor. The American example proves that companies can and should deal with their own past. The Business Archive Section Quarterly hosts in its volumes various projects organized by corporate archivists [8].

Unfortunately, most companies in our country have not realized the significance of their heritage and the possible profits-to-be-gained from their holistic management. The next task that the community of Greek archivists needs to take up is the introduction of the international perception for corporate archives as part of a company's and a country's cultural heritage inside academic curricula. We cannot invest anymore on infrequent factors for preserving and acquiring archives. We need to discuss and form a successful national strategy. To my views the success of such a plan can be secured only if companies are involved into this cause and archivists realize their role as heritage managers.

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**Yannis Stoyannidis graduated** from the University of Thessaly in 2004. He holds an MA in Modern history/Industrial archaeology from the same institution. His doctoral research in the field of the Social History of Medicine focused on the history of tuberculosis and Athens sanatoria (submitted in 2016). An extended research was conducted about the Athens gasworks on behalf of the City of Athens (2011-2013). Its outcome was a museum exhibition and a book entitled "Athens Gasworks". Moreover, Yannis has participated in various research programmes, concerning the industrial history & heritage of the city of Volos (2005-2009). Since 2017 he has been teaching Archival Science at the University of West Attica. Since late 2018 he is a member of the research team for the digitization of the Historical Archive at the University of Thessaly.