

MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN THE (RE)MAKING OF HISTORY Schools and Museums in Greece

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Abstract

Challenging the long-established idea of the Mediterranean as the cradle of modern architecture, this contribution argues that due consideration should be given to moments of profound change, thereby splitting the Mediterranean into its fragments. We may thus restore to its extraordinary cities the many and varied architectural traditions that were able to nurture and blend: the much-debated mediterraneità (Mediterraneity) turns out to be far less 'monolithic' in its expression.

Along this line of thoughts, schools and museums built in Greece from 1923 to the aftermath of WWII may well reveal the role of architecture, when called upon to express the founding values of a collective identity. The dialectic between tradition and innovation, eclecticism and modernism, uncovers its meaning case by case.

Keywords: modern architecture, Mediterranean, school, museum, Greece

Eurocentric perspectives on the Mediterranean

Introducing *Orientalism* as the system of Western institutions established to claim an economic, political and military hegemony over the Orient, Edward Said (1978: 3) also decoded the mechanisms of this cultural colonization, thus marking a turning point in the monumental history of the Mediterranean world narrated by Fernand Braudel (1977). According to some scholars, the Mediterranean may even be understood as a "scientific invention," whose unitary conception was a by-product of French expeditions to Egypt, the Peloponnese and Algeria (Bourguet, Lepetit, Nordman & Sinarellis, 1998).

Benedetto Gravagnuolo (1994) and, more recently, Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino (2010), outlined an "architectural genealogy" of the

Modern Movement's engagement with the Mediterranean and its everyday vernacular.

Meanwhile, recent studies on the work of non-mainstream European architects, engineers and builders across the Mediterranean have opened new horizons in research, questioning the meaning, and inflection, of modern architecture in the different contexts where it took roots.¹

The importance of the Mediterranean as a key destination for subsequent generation of young architects from different backgrounds remains an evergreen subject (Bonfante, 2014; Di Loreto, 2018), whose constant term of reference is the charismatic figure of Le Corbusier (Bonillo & Monnier, 1991; Gravagnuolo, 1997). Placing side by side the works by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Fernand Pouillon and Alvaro Siza, the exhibition *Domus Mare Nostrum - Habiter le mythe méditerranéen* (Bonillo, 2014) emphasised once again the inextricable link between modern architecture and the Mediterranean. However, the "Mediterranean tradition" into which the work of Le Corbusier is interwoven seems all but monolithic. When identifying Le Corbusier's guiding stars, J.-L. Bonillo (1997) gave Istanbul equal footing with the Parthenon. Adolf Max Vogt (1996) argued that the *Voyage d'Orient* - and Ottoman architecture - left a permanent mark on the master who, according to Yorgos Simeoforidis (1997), was deeply fascinated by Byzantine architecture in the enchanting landscape of Mount Athos and the Greek islands.

CIAM IV and the new Greek schools

In the summer of 1933, CIAM members started their sea voyage across the Mediterranean from Marseille to Athens, where Le Corbusier uttered the famous words "the Acropolis made me a rebel" (Le Corbusier, 1933). Later on, they sailed to the Cyclades and, almost unexpectedly, found traditional houses

¹ The conference "Crossing Boundaries. Rethinking European architecture beyond Europe", Palermo, 13-16 April 2014, provided the author with an opportunity to take good stock of research in the field.

embodying the same timeless architectural solutions they had been working out for a decade or so: iconic combination of pure volumes, flat roofs and white walls without decoration.

Back in Athens, CIAM members visited some newly built schools designed by young Greek architects: dissymmetrical compositions, functional layouts, a geometry of pure volumes in perfect harmony with the Attic landscape. Local newspapers proudly reported on their comments of admiration (Giacumacatos & Godoli, 1985: 9-10). According to Pierre Chareau, rather than copying western projects, Greek architects had found their own path to modern architecture in response to the local climate. What is sure is that the scale of intervention and speed of execution - despite limited technical and financial means - marked an undeniable success for the new schools, which achieved considerable press coverage and attracted much scholarly work ever since.

However, it cannot pass unnoticed the correspondence between the Greek government engagement in such massive school building programme and the arrival in Greece of 1,300,000 refugees from Asia Minor, almost one fourth of the total population at the time.

Following the Greco-Turkish War, the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923) had ratified the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, creating a refugee problem on a scale until then unknown, in regions already facing a demographic reshuffling. The presence of Asia Minor refugees led to an extensive economic development programme funded by foreign loans, while their settlement became part of the nation-building process.

As the place where, by learning Greek, a new cultural identity was to be forged, the school became a "dominating theme"² (Sedlmayr, 1948) somehow complementary to the church, and often equipped with a combination of indoor and outdoor facilities, functional and collective spaces forming a sort of microcosm.

² Sedlmayr suggests that, throughout history, some architectural themes acquired particular importance, attracting the best creative energies and providing a common ground - a centre - for all figurative arts.

Patroklos Karantinos, who designed up to forty schools (most of which actually built) dedicated a book to the new school buildings (1938), yet selecting the most responsive to the modernist canon. Even so, and despite the limited number of examples,³ the book still conveys the pioneering effort made by Greek architects to move beyond the constraints imposed by the Ministry of Education, who supervised design, construction and construction management. The main quality of these buildings lays in their depicting what a modern school could be in villages, towns, and large urban centers in different regions of Greece. Certainly, not every school anticipated modern architecture. Young Greek architects were seeking a balance between local aesthetic idioms and the clean forms theorized by the Modern Movement. Some beautiful schools did feature simplified eclectic forms, bearing a tangible reference to the various architectural traditions then still vital in Greece.

New schools for a new Thessaloniki

If Patris II had continued his journey further East, CIAM participants were to contemplate the ruins of Thessaloniki and Smyrna, namely the end of the multiethnic Ottoman empire with its cosmopolitan port-cities. To Pierre Lavedan, the reconstruction of Thessaloniki in Greece posed on a scale until then unknown the problem of the city, as a work of architecture (Lavedan, 1922). Consequently, Thessaloniki may be considered a special observatory, because the building of new schools was part of a wider process of city reconstruction (Yerolympos, 1995). Capital of the so-called New Lands acquired after the Balkan Wars (1911-13), the city had been destroyed by fire in August 1917 and, by 1926, its Greek population had more than doubled.

³ The total number of schools built, under construction, or planned, in 1931 reached almost 3000 (Giacumacatos & Godoli, 1985: 6).

The Mevlevi Hané school complex (1926) designed by Nikos Mitsakis was built on the area previously occupied by the monastery of Mevlevi Dervishes (1615) which had long been a spiritual centre for the Muslim community. Here Mitsakis started experimenting with elements of Byzantine architecture - arches, columns, capitals - simplified and adapted to become part of a modern composition. Neo-Byzantine was to characterise the city rising from its ashes following Hebrard's reconstruction plan, marking a clear break with the Ottoman past to recapture its Hellenic identity.



Figure 1. Nikos Mitsakis, Aghia Sofia school complex, 1928-32 (right) and Secondary School for Girls, 1933 (left), Thessaloniki (author's reconstruction).

In the Aghia Sofia school complex (1928-32), Mitsakis hovered between a modernist volumetric syntax and an eclectic lexicon, reinterpreting Byzantine elements as simple coloured volumes. By adopting a two-courtyards layout, he arranged the elementary school, the gymnasium and the Jewish schools so that they might be accessed independently, leaving the resulting areas for open-air activities, one of which directly facing onto the street reaching the nearby church of Aghia Sofia. Mitsakis questioned the role of the school as generative urban element at a time of great ethno-social instability (Darques, 2000), when the city around it was also being built.

A few blocks away, Dimitris Pikionis designed the Model Experimental School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, established in 1934 to meet the needs and demands of a new society to come. The school features a series of articulated volumes around a steep urban block, as sort of "Macedonian diorama" with a courtyard on two levels at its centre.

With this building, Dimitris Pikionis exemplified his idea of "re-invention":

Form is the result of many efforts by many souls. Architects should not invent short-lived forms, they should instead "re-invent" existing forms to meet our current needs. Form can join our souls in an ideal symbol. But this is not a one man task: this cannot begin and end with the work of a single person. Architects and artists should not invent ephemeral forms, rather should they reinterpret the perfect forms of tradition in line with current needs and constraints. This is not just a mental exercise, it also involves emotions. A text from ancient Greece describes three kind of creations: a) the "backward-looking creation" indicating our link to the past; b) the "prevident creation" indicating our way of dealing with the present and c) the "lovable creation" indicating our feelings as opposite and complementary to logic. These three definitions have been brought together. The "international" implying the relationship between different races must come to terms with the "national" manifesting the distinguishing character of each race. (Pikionis, 1991: 6).

Archetypes and the modern lexicon: two museums by P. Karantinos

While Hans Sedlmayr included the museum among the modern "dominating themes" (Sedlmayr, 1948), Lewis Mumford defined museums as urban institutions *par excellence* (Mumford, 1975: 639). Benedict Anderson emphasised the vital role of museums in the self-representational narrative of rising nation states (Andreson, 1983). From a non-eurocentric perspective, museums provide an extraordinary opportunity to decode the dialectic between eclecticism and modernism, tradition and innovation, uncovering its meaning

case by case. In many cases, museums became instrumental in dissociating the present from the recent past and selecting from history a past that could best consolidate an idealized vision of the future.

A key figure in the debate about new school buildings, Patroklos Karantinos also leads us to the heart of the debate on modern museum architecture, in constant a tension between place and abstraction, between rootedness and exportable lessons. Karantinos was among the founding members of the Greek group of CIAM (1932), and played a decisive part in connecting Greek architects with the central European Modern Movement (Giacumacatos, 2003; Fessas-Emmanouil, 2005). Born in Constantinople of Kefalonian parents, Karantinos studied architecture at Athens Polytechnic at a time when the newly founded Faculty of Architecture was defining its cultural orientation. In Athens, Karantinos was introduced to traditional architecture by Dimitris Pikionis. On moving to Paris instead (1927), he became familiar with the work of Auguste Perret (collaborating with him for a few months), Tony Garnier and Le Corbusier. Back in Greece, Karantinos took an active part in the local debate. An example of his militant attitude is his objection to the idea of housing the new Parliament in the old Royal Palace, for which he proposed conversion into a central museum complex (1929).

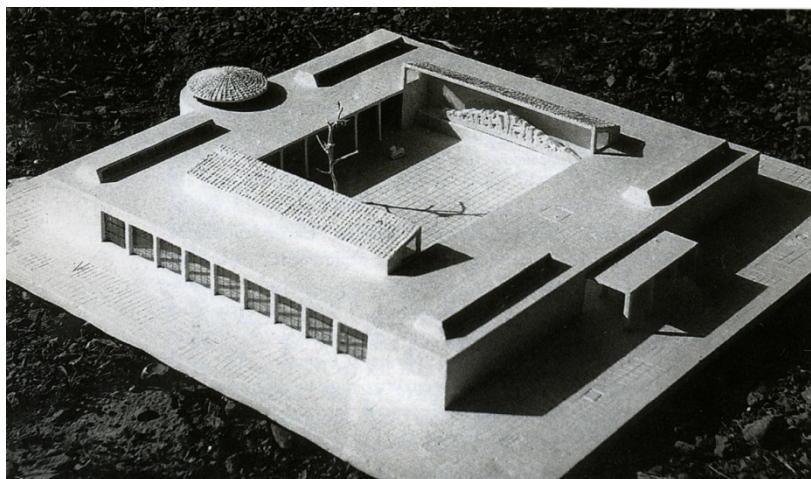


Figure 2. Patroklos Karantinos, model to scale of the Olympia archaeological museum (first solution), ca. 1952 (from Giacumacatos, 2003).

In 1933, Karantinos seized the opportunity of Athens' international exposure to show CIAM delegates his school at the feet of the Acropolis. In 1934, while preparing the book about the new schools, he organized the First Exhibition of Modern Architecture in Greece.

Karantinos' early museum projects at Argos (1936) and Corfu (1938) were followed by other commissions after the Second World War, when he was called upon to study the extension of major National museums – at Iraklion and Athens – and design new archaeological museums at Olympia (1952-66) and Thessaloniki (1960-62).

The civil war (1946-49), and a prolonged economic crisis, rendered the Greek aftermath of World War II even more critical than elsewhere.

At that critical juncture, most Greek architects joined unconditionally modern architecture (Doumanis, 1984), whereas Karantinos – in defining the typological and functional character of his museums projects – continued exploring the archetypes of classical architecture. When working at the Olympia project, he reflected upon the “distinguishing character” of museums in Mediterranean countries (Karantinos, 1954). Recalling a trip to Olympia on a clear winter morning, he argued that works like the pediments of the temple of Zeus, the Nike of Paionios or the Hermes of Praxiteles were originally created into the light. If locked inside, these works were to appear as frozen Titans deprived of every vibration of life. Thus, in exhibition spaces for sculptures, the Mediterranean light demanded an architecture of its own, a spatial syntax for light to reanimate the ancient works of art. In his first project for the Olympia Karantinos envisaged a silent courtyard building where antiquities would stand out, a reinterpretation of the atrium – the house of the ancients – in a symmetrical layout. The actual museum built in the late fifties followed instead a basilica-type layout, where “Titans” received light filtering from the roof of the central nave.

Karantinos' design for the archaeological museum at Thessaloniki may be understood as a late contribution to the long process of reconstruction.

Displaying Hellenistic and Byzantine artifacts⁴ in a modernist space, the new archaeological museum evoked the mythical origin of the city of Cassander and its past glories in a suspended atmosphere meant to arouse an emotive response from the visitors, whose modern spirit would be enhanced when confronted with the precious works of art.



Figure 3. Patroklos Karantinos, entrance to the archaeological museum, Thessaloniki (from Giacumacatos, 2003).

Initially, Karantinos worked on a series of archetypes - the atrium, the cross-shaped layout, the circular plan - finally adopting a central patio encompassed by a double exhibition circuit: one for Byzantine art and another for archaeological findings. The low height and the ambient light - resulting from the articulation of the cross-section and a system of movable slats - combined to achieve an anti-monumental character. However, like a sort of modern temple, the building rose from a basement. Reaching out to the entrance colonnade where visitors could find artefacts anticipating the museum collections, this basement blends the museum into the surrounding public spaces, which would in turn acquire new meanings following the visitors' experiences of the exhibition halls. Slender columns, horizontal slabs, glass walls and glass blocks combine to achieve a rarefied atmosphere, aimed at contextualizing the visitor as a modern man in front of the city's artistic heritage.

⁴ While the building programme was defined in the 1940s, the decision to include the Byzantine collection in the new museum dates back to 1960.

Concluding remarks

When challenging the long-established idea of the Mediterranean as a polar star of modern architecture, the Mediterranean is unavoidably epitomised by its port cities, bearing concrete evidence to their varied cultures that they were able to nurture and blend, and to the cosmopolitan period which marked the complex and passage to modernity. Centuries of cultural coexistence, according to Maurice Cerasi, rendered Mediterranean port cities similar to the floating settlement of Southeast Asia: a set of barges of all sizes and types, anchored to their hinterland but connected to each other and constantly shifting (Cerasi, 2005: 9-10). After decades of International Eclecticism, the Mediterranean townscape was caught once more into the cross-fire of stereotypes: "timeless architecture", "classical archetypes", and the rising imagery of the International Style.

While research on Mediterranean cosmopolitanism has gained momentum from various disciplinary perspectives (Dumont & Georgeon, 1992; Meijer, 1999; Driessen, 2005; Kolluoğlu & Toksöz, 2010; Mansel, 2010; Lafi & Freitag, 2014), some attempts have been made to splitting the Mediterranean into its fragments (Carlotti, Nencini & Posocco, 2015).

Studying in depth a number of case studies, particularly when dealing with the actual (historically contextualised) construction/reconstruction of the cities concerned, the much-debated of *mediterraneità* (Mediterraneity) turns to be far less "monolithic". If (re)reading the adventure of the modern in Greece focusing on schools and museums may undermine the Mediterranean myth, it may also help us recapture the ultimate scope of architecture, called upon to synthesize and transmit the founding values of a given community.

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