

Rural and Urban Schools: Northern Greece in the Interwar Period



Cristina Pallini, Aleksa Korolija and Silvia Boca

Abstract Modernism—as cultural and artistic expression of modern core values—is often associated with urban and industrial contexts, in stark contrast to a “backward countryside”. Focusing on modernist reinventions of the rural landscape, MOD-SCAPES (funded under HERA JRP III call “Uses of the Past”, Oct. 2016–2019) specifically questions these preconceived ideas. In different political and ideological contexts agricultural development schemes carried out in Europe during the twentieth century were pivotal experiments in nation-building policies. In addition, they provided a common testing ground for the ideas, and tools, of environmental and social scientists, architects and engineers, planners and landscape architects, as well as artists. This contribution presents the case study of Northern Greece, focusing on rural and urban schools as a key architectural theme, 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 School architecture · Modernism · Northern Greece · Refugee settlement · CIAM IV

1 Nation-Building and School Architecture

The Kingdom of Greece established in 1829 consisted of Peloponnesus, Mainland Greece, Euboea, the Cyclades and the Sporades, eventually including the Ionian Islands (1863) and Thessaly (1880). After the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the country almost doubled in size, annexing Epirus, Macedonia, Crete and the Aegean islands. The ambition of a Greater Greece encompassing the coastal regions of Asia Minor collapsed with the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), in the aftermath of which 1.3 million Ottoman Christians were forced to cross the Aegean in exchange for half a million Muslims. Asia Minor refugees amounted to almost one-fourth of the population of Greece at the time, a figure favouring cultural homogenization within

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the national territory. The role of schools has been crucial in the process, endorsing Anderson's (1983) idea of the modern school system as a fundamental component for the rising nation states.¹ The impact of a centralised and standardised school system was crucial in Northern Greece, where foreign and minority schools had long backed cultural propaganda and territorial claims. Here, in the 1920s, Asia Minor refugees replaced earlier Turkish, Bulgarian, Serbian or Jewish settlements. In 1930, when the Refugee Settlement Commission handed over the work to the Ministry of Agriculture, Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos launched an ambitious programme for upgrading Greece educational asset. The school programme, so crucial to cope with the country's high rate of illiteracy and lack of school buildings, served as a catalyst for a generation of Greek architects, who embraced the revolution of modernism.

2 Branding Hellenism: Late-Neoclassical Proto-Rationalism

In Greece, the first proper schools appeared as late as 1895, following a Royal Decree of 1894, which established their locations and characteristics. These inflected in four standard layouts differing in the number of classes (Fig. 1), defined by Engineer Kallias on the base of French precedents.² The classroom constituted a basic spatial unit, aggregated following the principles of symmetry, regularity and hygiene. Depending on location, the school size ranged from one, two, four to six classrooms. Kallias suggested an elevation for each prototype, laying emphasis on the main

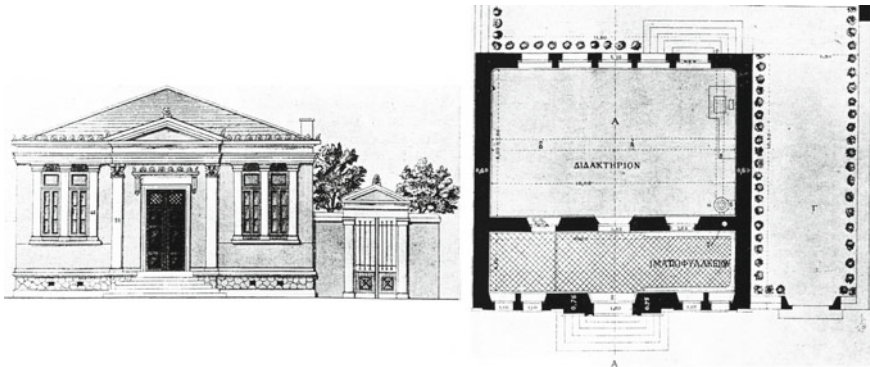


Fig. 1 Single-classroom school by D. Kallias. *Source* Kallias (1906)

¹Cf. Anderson (1983).

²Dimitris Kallias (1858–1939) refers to the French regulation about measurements of classrooms, *Locaux scolaires V* and how during the International Conference on Hygiene and Economicity of School Buildings held in December 1905 in Paris, Greek Schools were highly praised for their features. Cf. Kallias (1906) and Tzonis et al. (2013).

entrance and adopting elements of the neo-classical style introduced in Athens by Bavarian architects. According to the Munich-trained architect Emannouil Kriezis, these schools prioritised discipline over pedagogical criteria, mocking monumentality into urban and rural areas alike, rather than enhancing a sense of place: “pupils should bring back home—into their daily life—something from their school: an idea of beauty rather than mere discipline” (Giacumacatos and Godoli 1985, p. 5).

Combining a functional layout with the idea of Greekness conveyed by neo-classical stylistic elements, Kallias’ prototypes acquired a strategic significance for the Greek communities outside Greece, in Alexandria, Smyrna, Istanbul or Thessaloniki. In Macedonia, the epicentre of a conflict between territorial ambitions and inextricable ethnic and linguistic identities, the impact of the standardised Greek school system was particularly effective. The role of Macedonia as a frontier of Hellenization becomes self-evident when considering the proliferation of maps showing the distribution of Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian and Serbian schools in the *vilayet* (province) of Thessaloniki.³ In this respect, the work of Xenophon Païonidis (1863–1933) for the unredeemed Greeks of the North shows the strategic importance of school buildings. After obtaining a degree in architecture from Munich University (1892), Païonidis moved back to Thessaloniki and succeeded in expressing the architectural ideology of the Greek community, conveying its power, prestige and yearning for independence.⁴ A special chapter of Païonidis’ career concerns his activity for the progressive metropolitan of Kassandra who promoted works of public utility in the small villages of Chalkidiki damaged by the Turks after the Greek insurrection of 1821. Most of his works were actually schools, where younger generations were to learn Greek and nurture attachment to their distant mother country. Somehow juxtaposed to the church, the school was a symbolic presence of new kind. While church architecture drew inspiration from Byzantine precedents, the school was both a functional and evocative presence marking the village core, often harmonising the neo-classical canon with local building traditions. Following Kallias’ prototypes, Païonidis often integrated local building techniques, experimenting with the expressive and values of various materials: different types of stone, exposed brick or marble (Fig. 2).

3 CIAM IV, the Modern School as a Master Problem

In the summer of 1933, CIAM members started their sea voyage from Marseille to Athens on the *Patris II*, where Le Corbusier enthusiastically declared that the Acropolis had turned him into a rebel (Le Corbusier 1933). Later on, they sailed to the Cyclades where, almost unexpectedly, they found traditional villages made up

³According to the “Map of the Christian Schools of Macedonia” (*Carte des Écoles Chrétiennes de la Macédoine*) published in the volume *La Macédoine, son passé et son présent* by Phocas-Cosmetatos (1919).

⁴Cfr. Mandopoulou-Panayotopoulou (1997).

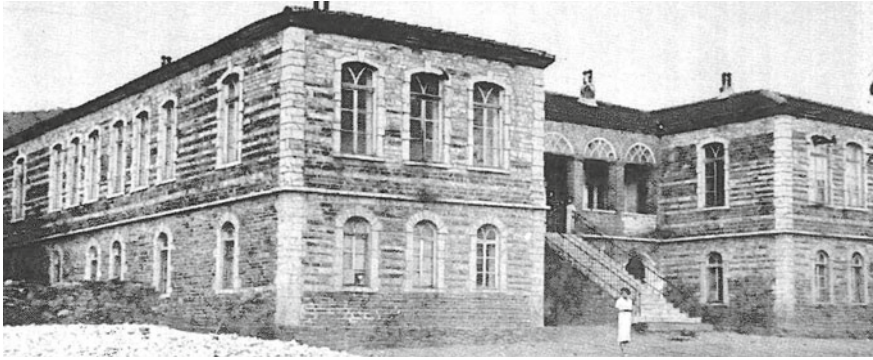


Fig. 2 Greek Primary School at Ormilía (Chalkidiki) by Xenophon Païonidis, 1907–1909. *Source* Mandopoulou-Panayotopoulou (1997)

of simple volumes, flat roofs, dynamic sections: the *raumplan* they had been chasing for a decade or so. Back in Athens, CIAM members visited some newly built schools: asymmetrical compositions of pure volumes in perfect harmony with the Attic landscape. On 4 August 1933, the Greek newspaper *Neos Kosmos* reported on “Foreigners’ admiration for the new school buildings, the sign of an advanced civilization”. Pierre Chareau congratulated the local architects for finding their own way to modernity (Giacumacatos and Godoli 1985, pp. 9–10). Siegfried Giedion took pictures of some of the students running on the rooftop of a school at the feet of Acropolis, portraying the scene as true modern public space (Kousidi 2016). Reporting on his attendance to the CIAM, the Italian rationalist architect Pietro Maria Bardi (1933) praised Greece’s effort of building 3167 schools in just four years.⁵ In Greece, the school became a “master problem” (Sedlmayr 2006) providing a common challenge for architects from different generations and backgrounds, while embodying the collective meaning of architecture. To implement Venizelos’ programme, the Minister of Education Giorgios Papandreu established an ad hoc architectural department (1930–1932) including prominent figures like Aristotelis Zachos (1871–1939) and Dimitris Pikionis (1877–1968), as well as younger architects like Nikos Mitsakis (1899–1941), Kyriakos Panayotakos (1902–1982), Patroklos Karantinos (1903–1976) and Thucydides Valentis (1908–1982). Mainly graduated from Athens Polytechnic, these latter played a key part in the design team, adapting modernist principles to the Greek landscape.

Pietro Maria Bardi observed that young Greek architects identified themselves with the Ministry of Education, noticing with much appreciation the works by Karantinos and Mitsakis. According to Bardi, such a massive engagement in school projects had swept away any remains of the Bavarian style. The “Greek spirit” had

⁵The number of schools actually built changes according to the source.

penetrated rationalism and, in a couple of decades, Greece would express its own landscape-oriented architecture, full of vigour and local colour.⁶

Despite limited technical and financial means, the scale of intervention and speed of execution of the new schools marked an undeniable success, which achieved considerable press coverage attracting much contemporary and later scholarly work. According to François Loyer (1966), the school programme served as a catalyst for a movement in the making, allowing its emergence and intellectual definition. The revolution of modernism, in Greece, had a purely formal character: “An intellectual movement of young artists who found the terms of a manifesto in a political circumstance” (Loyer 1966, p. 416).

Limited funding required rationalisation of construction. The standard layout consisted of six classrooms on two separate floors, with the possibility of merging the upper units to form a lecture hall when needed. In the cold and windy northern regions, classrooms were facing south and the corridor, exposed to the north, embedded in the built-up mass. In the warmer regions of the south, instead, classrooms were facing north and the southern façade was shaded by a cantilevered corridor. Karantinos adopted these guidelines in the primary school on Kalisperi Street in Athens (1931), where classrooms turned their back to the Acropolis (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Photo of school on Kalisperi Street, with the Acropolis in the background. Photo by P.M.Bardi (1933) from *Quadrante* n.5

⁶Pietro Maria Bardi (1933, p. 13) wrote: “[...] today, in Greece, we are witnessing the changes that the local spirit brings to the rationalist idea: in twenty years Greece will have its own architecture of environment, of *lena*, of an entirely local color”.

Experimenting with the thermal zoning between the corridor and the classrooms, the school programme provided excellent opportunities to define energy-efficient design criteria. In addition to orientation, experiments also included building materials capable of storing heat and releasing it gradually, as well as arranging volumes for a better thermal comfort (Mavrogianni and Tsoukatou 2006).⁷ Different contexts also meant using brick or local stones as infill walls for the load bearing concrete structures.

In 1938, Patroklos Karantinos published a book on new schools,⁸ including standard layouts for small schools of two, three or four classrooms.

The modernist schools of Athens and Piraeus were presented in the opening section, followed by the four schools of Thessaloniki. Unexpectedly, two of these buildings did not comply with the modernist canon, borrowing elements from Byzantine architecture and reinterpreting the traditional Macedonian house. Some schools in Peloponnesus, in the islands, in the frontier regions of Epirus and Eastern Macedonia, featured simplified eclectic forms, bearing a tangible reference to the various architectural traditions still vital in Greece.

4 In the Heart of Rural Refugee Settlements⁹

Significantly, reporting on his journey into Greece, Pietro Maria Bardi did not overlook the critical demographic juncture: “2.600.000 inhabitants in 1907, 5.600.000 in 1921; the arrival of refugees in the aftermath of a gruelling war. Even the efforts by international organisations were not sufficient to organise such a huge avalanche” (Bardi 1933, p.15).

The great majority of Asia Minor refugees repopulated the so-called New Lands of Macedonia and Thrace in Northern Greece, in view of stabilising the borders and unlocking the region’s agricultural potential. Following social, ethnic and demographic reshuffling, large-scale reclamation works produced a radical change of the physical features and settlement network. From 1922 to 1930, a special body of the League of the Nations, the Refugee Settlement Commission, undertook this critical process. To foster mutual help and social cohesion, refugees settled by groups, often

⁷The paper gives an overview from the Rationalist period up to present-day. The paper is based on the research project ‘The Bioclimatic Dimension of Educational Buildings in Greece’ by K. Koukouzi, A. Mavrogianni, M. Tsoukatou under supervision by prof. Evangelos Evangelinos.

⁸The original Greek title is *Τα Νέα Σχολικά Κτίρια*, meaning *The new school buildings*. The book covers the period of the Venizelos government (1928–1932). The volume has been re-printed in 2019 by TEE (Karantinos 2019).

⁹This section is partly based on Vilma Hastaoglou-Martiniadis, Cristina Pallini, “Colonizing the ‘New Lands’: rural settlement of refugees in Northern Greece (1922–1940)”, in *Clara Architecture/Recherche* (forthcoming 2019), and on extensive fieldwork by the three authors, in the framework of the EU-funded research MODSCAPES Modernist Reinventions of the Rural Landscapes. During fieldworks, the authors collected maps and surveyed public buildings, private houses and farms, with a particular focus on the spatial arrangement of the settlement’s cores.

by village of origin, according to three alternative solutions: on sites of abandoned Turkish or Bulgarian villages, in new quarters adjacent to existing villages, or in newly built settlements. In early 1930s, 509 new rural communities were founded in Central Macedonia, mostly in the plain, 75 of which in the immediate vicinity of Thessaloniki. The newly established refugee settlement followed a standard layout, characterised by a uniform grid of streets surrounded by field allotments, providing for central public space and rudimentary communal amenities, such as the square with the village hall, the church and the school. The decree law on rural resettlement of refugees specified that each settlement had to “be laid out according to a simple plan and divided into lots” (Kontogiorgi 2006, p. 291) and all public buildings and sites were to be simple and uniform.¹⁰ While affiliation to the Orthodox Church was the reason why refugees had left Asia Minor, fostering a shared Greek identity among the diverse peoples of the New Lands became a priority. Rural refugee settlements clearly show the civic role of educational buildings, juxtaposed to the church at the centre of the village. Most often, the church and the school marked the intersection of the main roads, occupying two adjoining parcels. The village Axios, near Giannitsa, well exemplifies this pattern. Accessed from secondary streets, the school and the church are set on opposite sides of the main road, attracting a combination of collective spaces and playing fields. In the village of Nea Pella, the school and the church are located halfway the main road rising from ancient Via Egnatia to the higher ground occupied by the football field (Fig. 4). At Palafyito, instead, the



Fig. 4 Map of Nea Pella showing the system of public spaces (A, B, C) located along the main axis moving uphill from Egnatia Road (A) The main core (C) includes: the Church (1), the School (2), the Acqueduct (3) and the Sport Field (4). Authors’ elaboration

¹⁰According to the Government Gazette, 6/7/1923–11/7/1923, Article 6: “Regarding rural settlement of refugees” (Kontogiorgi 2006).

school—a very simple building dating back to the 1950s—marks the edge between the village and the fields.

The village of Neos Skopos in the Strymon Valley well depicts the eagerness of the community to take an active part in the construction of the main public buildings. It was established in 1923 by refugee families from Skopos in Eastern Thrace, who lived in tents and makeshift huts until the Refugee Settlement Commission drew the plan of the village and built permanent homes. “It was like repotting a plant where the roots begin to grow again, and it continues growing, developing and progressing in its new container” (Naniopoulos 2014, p. 116).

The first Church of Saint Demetrius was a simple wooden structure which served as a school during the week. As early as 1927, a proper school was built on the main square, following the conventional four-classroom layout on opposite sides of the main entrance. Sir John Hope Simpson (1868–1961), a member of the British Parliament, remarked the crucial importance of the church and the school. As the village was taking shape, the inhabitants proceeded to build a temporary wooden church, in view of rebuilding it in stone. Even before being comfortably settled, villagers commenced to agitate for a school. Their demands were so insistent that the Refugee Settlement Commission reserved a plot for the school in every village. In many villages, an extra house was to serve temporarily the purpose of a school. The Commission assisted the population either by making a grant in cash or by providing materials, with the help of which people constructed a school building by themselves.¹¹

5 Thessaloniki, Modernism’s Fault¹²

In an interview given on 4 September 1931, Minister of Education Giorgios Papanreou announced that 26 elementary schools, 6 gymnasiums and a teacher’s college were to be built at Thessaloniki (Giacumacatos and Godoli 1985, p. 6).

If *Patris II* had continued his journey further north, CIAM participants were to contemplate the ruins of the once-thriving Ottoman port city, annexed to Greece in 1912 and destroyed by fire in 1917. Cut off from its Balkan hinterland, Thessaloniki had become the capital of the New Lands whose Greek population had more than doubled by 1926. For this reason, Thessaloniki provides special observatory into modern Greek architecture. In fact, Venizelos’ programme for the new schools was part of a wider process of city reconstruction, rendered even more difficult by massive refugee settlement. In a context where foreign and minority schools had long backed cultural propaganda and territorial claims, the new school buildings became

¹¹Cfr. Simpson (1929).

¹²This section is partly based on “Colonizing the ‘New Lands’: rural settlement of refugees in Northern Greece (1922–1940)” by Vilma Hastaoglou-Martinidis and Cristina Pallini (forthcoming 2019), and on extensive fieldwork by the three authors, in the framework of the EU-funded research MODSCAPES Modernist Reinventions of the Rural Landscapes.

strongholds of a future urban topography and cultural makeup. The Neo-Byzantine style codified by French planner Ernest Hébrard,¹³ the main author of the reconstruction plan, was to qualify the future city centre, marking a clear break with the Ottoman past to recapture the city's Hellenic identity. As documented by Karantinos' book, two of the new schools in Thessaloniki moved away from the modernist canon. One is the Aghia Sofia school complex designed by Nikos Mitsakis (1928–1932) to host a Jewish school, a Greek elementary school and a high school. Hovering between a rational volumetric articulation and an eclectic approach, Mitsakis experimented with elements of Byzantine architecture—arch, column, pilaster strip, capital—simplified and adapted to modernist syntax.¹⁴ A few blocks away, Dimitris Pikionis built the famous Experimental School (1935–1936) which marked his shift from the architecture of the islands to traditional Macedonian architecture (Fig. 5). This “Macedonian diorama” exemplified Pikionis's notion 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. [...] 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. (Pikionis 1991, p. 6).

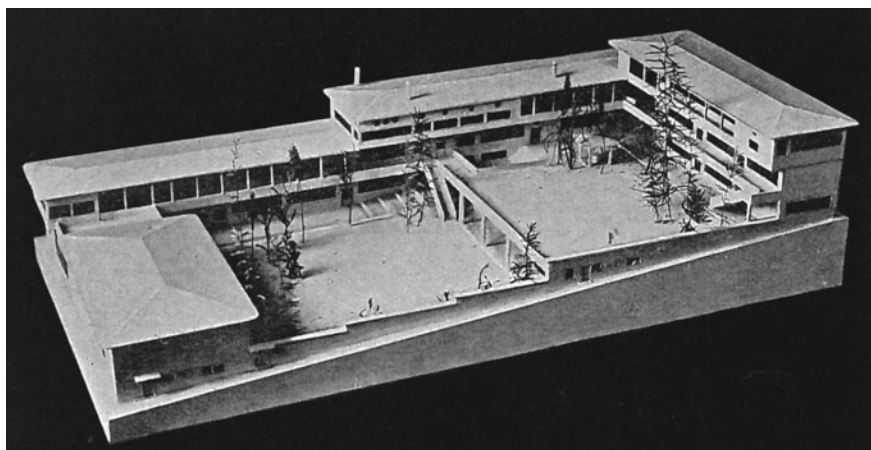


Fig. 5 Maquette of the Experimental School in Thessaloniki by D.Pikionis *Source* Karantinos (1938, p. 132), *Ta Nea Scholika Ktiria*

¹³Ernest Hébrard (1875–1933), architect, archaeologist and town planner. Hébrard received the Prix de Rome in 1904, for which he produced, as head of the French Army Archaeological Service, a conjectural reconstruction of Diocletian's palace at Split. Hébrard was in Thessaloniki in August 1917 when the fire occurred.

¹⁴Cfr. Paioussaki (1999).

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