

Vernacular architecture in Crete Continuities in concrete

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On 1 March 1900, the multi-talented English archaeologist Arthur Evans began digging at Knossos. The fragile, four-thousand-year-old materials needed protection, but more than this, they needed to be interpreted, in order to provide evidence for and recreate the mythical Minoan world. Between 1910 and 1928 the use of reinforced concrete was introduced to the restoration of the Minoan ruins. In just a few years' time, the hill of Knossos had become an inexhaustible source of architectural forms, decorative motifs and colours. Redesigned, depending on the technical idiosyncrasies of the raw materials and the treatment method, these new elements came to stand beside those handed down through Cretan tradition. In Crete, the exploration of that lost mythical age coincides with the creation of modernism through mutual exchanges.

Syncretism. Antiquity, or rather prehistory, only began to play an active part as a glossary and an available cultural resource in the past hundred years, when the buried "palaces" of the Minoans and the cities of the Dorians started to come to light; it is worth noting that this coincided with the dawn of the modern era. Apart from the archaeological discoveries, the first 12 years of the 20th century were the most fertile period of modern times for Crete, when the imminent union with the Greek state required, as a cultural strategy, the application of a different stamp, one closer to European, modern events. The new contents of this different culture were required to highlight the difference between them and the Neoclassicism of the status quo. Throughout the 12-year period of autonomy and at ever-increasing speed over the subsequent decades until 1940, a peripheral culture, recognisable as authentically Cretan, took permanent shape across the island. This folk culture was required to interweave figures and motifs clearly, into a unified narrative, with the aim of demonstrating an uninterrupted flow and cohesion from prehistory to the present.

The preceding phase, that of the Ottoman occupation, had been a period of fermentation in the arts, where elements of pastoral life, Veneto-Cretan culture in the cities, and the newly introduced Ottoman culture, later combined with purely European stimuli, were blended in an intermixture that forms the basis, the leaven of every physical object or expressive idiom that we now know as "Cretan". "Cretan" songs and dances can have as many correspondences as we wish to find with similar expressions in

antiquity or the Venetian East, but it is demonstrably proven that their greatest development is due not so much to the event of Union with Greece in itself, as to the overall dynamics that arose alongside the spirit of modernism. The differentiation between Crete and the other Greek peripheries was organised and evolved through the dynamics of the modern.

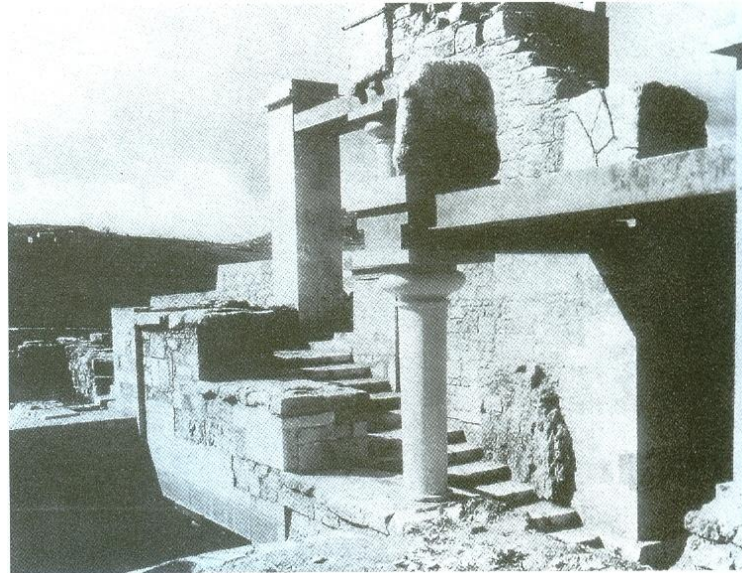


Figure 1. View of the third ramp of the "Great Staircase", of Knossos in 1910. Arthur Evans book *The Palace of Minos, III*, Oxford 1928, p.104.

Horizontalities. Reinforced concrete is the most reliable harbinger of the modernist spirit in Greece, the one that comes, directly and easily, to solve chronic problems, capable of assuming any form, using stable and readily available raw materials from the mineral-rich geological substructure of the Mediterranean. It was first used in the Knossos restorations, but large-scale application to city buildings followed, specially for internal slabs laid on masonry. After the 1950s, the decade of postwar reconstruction, reinforced concrete had become the only conceivable construction method. Greek cities grew along the model of small housing blocks, with long narrow balconies for each flat. The urban landscape, made up of individual houses in the Neoclassical inspiration, local simplicity and independent parallelepipeds, gradually became a continuum of cement slabs.

In rural settlements, the new material was increasingly introduced as the only solution capable of replacing the traditional terraces of rammed earth. In order to prevent water entering the old masonry, the slabs protrude from the main volume, introducing even in the countryside that horizontality which prevails in front of the small cubic units of the local rural tradition. Cement applications are also used to add annexes

to small, one- or two-room houses. A small bathroom, a short staircase, at least a new room on top of the new slab, comes to complete the traditional structures. In the Cretan countryside until the 1960s cement plaster and reinforced concrete has been used in each part of the constructions, not only in the bearing structural elements, but as final surface for pavements, in private internals and public streets. Until this period the real needs were conducting human activities regarding rural shelter's environment. Modern messages regarding the remodelling of the economic activities and not only the architectural techniques in this case, were introduced in the cities and in the rural areas, according to great expectations. The small size of the geographical entities, land properties but more of all local mores, has absorbed that messages, making them more intimate, functional to current needs.¹



Figure 2. Typical buildings on the main streets of the villages of Aghios Georgios (Lassithi Prefecture) and Mourtzaná (Rethymno Prefecture) in Crete. Photographs by the author.

New provincial roads were built during the first twelve years of the century, during the period of autonomy (1900-1912), and this road-building increased again in the 1950s, separating the old settlements from possible new developments. Each settlement had kept its historical core, usually abandoned, as the size of the properties and the traditional building materials and techniques did not permit modernization. The new roads, the new materials, the use of vehicles in rural activities, all needed a larger space. The new image of the villages developed as a sequence of single room stores and café, with secondary structures of dispute technical resolutions and imaginative use of extremely simple ironwork. In our discipline as it has been demonstrated in other ones, for the greek rural societies modernism should become part of the traditional mores, not

¹ Stathis Damianakos, *Le paysan grec. Défis et adaptations face à la société moderne*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1966 and its translation in Greek: *Από τον χωρικό στον αγρότη. Η ελληνική αγροτική κοινωνία απέναντι στην παγκοσμιοποίηση*, Αθήνα, 2002.

more important than them, one more formula, useful for them to survive as family, as clan, as village.

No urban projects were undertaken in the small centers until the 1960s. For Crete, a first approach was studied by the American studio Basil, regarding the territorial organization of tourism. That was to become the basis for future planning both in cities and in rural settlements. Between 1964 and 1967, the architect Takis Zenetos worked on the transformation of the villages of Plakiás and Aghia Galini into tourist destinations. In his technical reports on these two projects, Zenetos repeatedly refers to the necessity of preserving the existing local character, at a time when the negative examples of Italy and Spain were already appearing. "*Due to the singular beauty of its coasts... and the special character of the wild and untouched landscape, which is becoming an ever-rarer element*",² he attempts, through his architectural proposal, to capture the existing image and project it into the future. It was on this theoretical foundation that Takis Zenetos stood when, working on the evolution of Aghia Galini from a fishing village into a settlement of 6,000 inhabitants, he attempted to discover "*a structural system of building, which is responsive to the natural environment and the topography of the area*" (Zenetos, 1967) This phrase expresses a powerful morphological programme and carrier of functional unities.

Emulating nature as a fixed background and history as a place to extract crumbs of ideas and forms which he then develops, Zenetos follows to the letter the teachings of Pikionis, whereby "*...the forms - in contrast or in similarity to the shapes of the landscape - the synthesis of stability and mobility appropriate to a work of architecture should harmonise with the construction of the landscape*" (Pikionis, 1985). The morphology of the spaces in rural settlements is here translated into an economy of nature, while for the larger configurations, the cities, technological culture leads to similar forms, creating a bidirectional landscape. The limestone slabs of the Cretan land fulfil their role not just as a building material but also as morphology, and are understood as a simulation of the land, another land, utopian due to the impossibility of reshaping the properties, actual as regards siting and construction method.

² Τάκης Ζενέτος και Συνεργάται, *Πλακιάς. Ρυθμιστικόν Σχέδιον Τουριστικής Αναπτύξεως*, Υπουργείον Συντονισμού/Υπηρεσία Περιφερειακής Αναπτύξεως Κρήτης, Αθήνα 1967, Περίληψις Ι.
Takis Zenetos and Collaborators, *Plakiás. Urbanism Project for the Touristical Development*, Ministry of Coordination / Peripheral Development Service for Crete, Athens 1967, Introduction I.

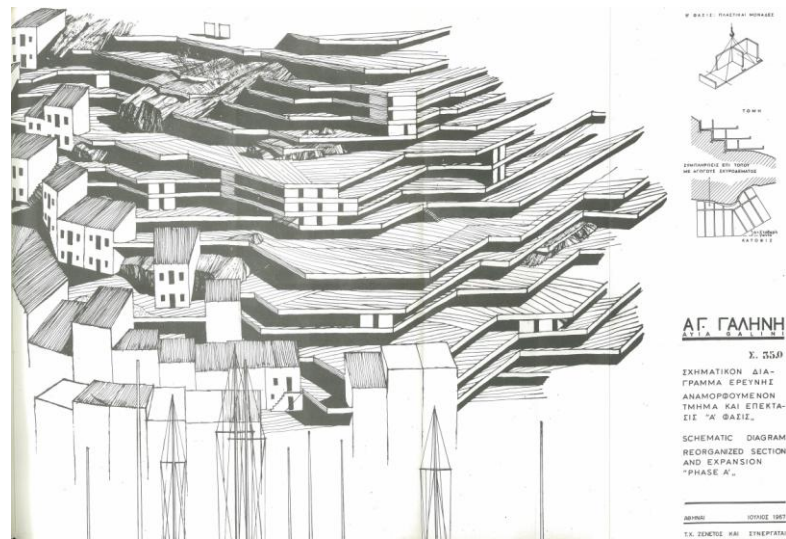


Figure 3. View of Takis Zenetos' projected extension of the Aghia Galini settlement. Library of the Technical Chamber of Greece / Department of Western Crete - Chaniá.

In all these applications to modern structures, works was undertaken without any project planning or the intervention of the specialist, engineer or architect. Personal projects guided by the spirit of *pensée sauvage* usually succeeded in giving a kind of continuity to vernacular landscapes, because they corresponded to real needs, as is always the case in spontaneous expressions, resulting in small-scale interventions. Later, in the Sixties, the new material would find a more or less correct use in the restoration or extension of rural buildings, but the scale would be totally different.

For other reasons, in Zenetos, horizontality has been the method used to make landscape collaborate with the human installation. However, there has never again been such a free recomposition of the givens of local tradition and landscape after Zenetos. The role of the horizontal stone slab in Greek architectural mores remained a tool in the hands of contractors and mediocrities. We can conclude that the horizontal slab, small or large, whether as the solution to the users' immediate needs or as a planned proposal, is probably the Greek unique feature par excellence, as a contribution to the construction of our modern built landscape. After the Second World War until the 1960s, if the general incentive of the society was the notion of progress, during the next two decades (1970-1990) it has changed into exuberance. This exuberance had no collaboration with the best architectural culture of the country and this is evident in the urban landscape. Political and economic factors continued with no expectations about the quality of our

environment in the last twenty years, when the initial incentive has been transformed into greed.

Inspiration. Though dissimilar, the derivations of the familiar shapes, colours and combinations which make up the vocabulary of tradition in the case of Crete are almost always drawn from the vocabulary of a comprehensive and scholarly artistic expression. This was the case during the Venetian period, at the dawn of the modern era and again in the 20th century. In the world of the folk artisan, these elements are easily reduced to the level of popular expressiveness, are assimilated, become the culture of the many, cut off from their original frame of reference, more digestible and available for multiple uses. In Crete, the prehistoric past came to light at the same time as Modernist interventions, which provided its inner support. The combination of past and future expectations, created new expressions of local culture, as a natural phenomenon. Modernism demonstrated the capacity to join into a coherent system all the local techniques and modes of artistic expression, rich in elements of the Italian Renaissance, the Ottoman Baroque and local pastoral life.

Local tradition has always contributed to modern Greek culture, a contemporary culture, on the borderline between the romantic and the rational spirit. Both the theoretical and the constructed work of the two undisputed teachers of architectural culture in Greece, Dimitris Pikionis and Aris Konstantinides, move the whole of modern expressiveness through the management of tradition as part of the culture of the modern. No other architect can show that skill and freshness in the transformation of those givens and their incorporation into our modern environment. Even Takis Zenetos, the most innovative of the Greek architects, tried to contribute to this debate in this laminar field, respect his personal researches. In the text of his Aghia Galini project, he introduces the term *Fantastic Architecture*, the “... *alternative solution of an Architecture, which creates the atmosphere of a renewed environment by classical means*”.³

During the 1950s and 1960s in Greece, signature architectural creation attempts to approach the truths of its traditional counterpart, while innumerable imperfect imitations preserve an adherence to a thematology that proves to be severely limited. This occurs because thought is first given to past times, theoretically innocent and genuine, limiting the action of modern messages. The wide variety of intermediate methods of composition and forms with which the body of tradition is enriched, would only begin to

³ Τάκης Ζενέτος και Συνεργάται, *Αγία Γαλήνη. Ρυθμιστικόν Σχέδιον Τουριστικής Αναπτύξεως*, Υπουργείου Συντονισμού/Υπηρεσία Περιφερειακής Αναπτύξεως Κρήτης, Αθήνα 1967, Περίληψις Ι.
Takis Zenetos and Collaborators, *Aghia Galini. Urbanism Project for the Touristical Development*, Ministry of Coordination / Peripheral Development Service for Crete, Athens 1967, Introduction I.

concern Greek architects after the 1990s, when younger generations who had studied in other European countries came to work with the material of their own country. This trend was also assisted by the revision of the unfortunately self-evident, classical morphological themes used by the postmodern interlude of the 1980s.

Spontaneous expression in structures, from the point of view of bioclimate solutions and the forms of the ephemeral that are aesthetically acceptable today, was only highlighted very late. Its first official presentation was at an exhibition at the Byzantine Museum of Athens in 2010, entitled *Archetypes. From Huts and Sheepfolds to Contemporary Art and Architecture*. The curator Giorgos Triantafyllou tried to present an alternative tradition, simultaneously Greek and universal.



Figure 4. Small additions to houses in the villages of Pikris (Rethymnon Prefecture) and Aghios Konstantinos (Lassithi Prefecture). The author's house in Iraklion, addition on top of an older construction (1995-96).

While the other arts also attempt to draw thematics from the local idiom, painting seems to take the lead in Greek artistic creation. What we have seen giving a new direction to the thematics of tradition / modernity over the past twenty years, with the participation of all the messages from the immediate environment of each place, had already been embodied in painting from the 1950s. The most important expressor of a synthetic proposal that could lead to architectural innovation was Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas. His work combines an artistic rendition of open space with an architectural mood. Movements and forms leap out of his paintings. Natural materials are ever present, but in such a way as to emerge through new combinations and uses, impressing the amazed eye. So, unexpectedly, a landscape familiar to the Greek viewer seems to have arisen from dreams or come from the future. Familiar shapes of houses evolve into modern associations with their surroundings, the courtyards, the stone walls, reaching an approach, open to further elaboration, to a residential area following in the footsteps of an urban planning proposal. The artist proposes a restatement of the chaos of accumulated elements that is only dissolved through elaboration and restatement, through a modern prism.

In the case of Greek architects today, this interest in turning the local into the international, the familiar and banal into the new and groundbreaking, in the elaboration

of the conditions of this unique land, has been and gone. In this laminar line of designing for the specific place, *modernism in retreat* of the country societies could become a fertile area to explore. Now the resistances are reduced and architectural thought and practice are more open to the periodic incursions of foreign trends, at first easily digestible to seekers of innovation in Greek architecture. These trends, however, are either applied as they are, without adaptation to local circumstances, or do not come to fruition in this particular place, in order to become, through restatement, part of the culture of this land. With the new technological methods and means of expression available, the whole of Greek tradition, ancient and modern, scholarly and popular, is capable of transmitting the beat of the times, making the work of architecture ever restless, and therefore groundbreaking.

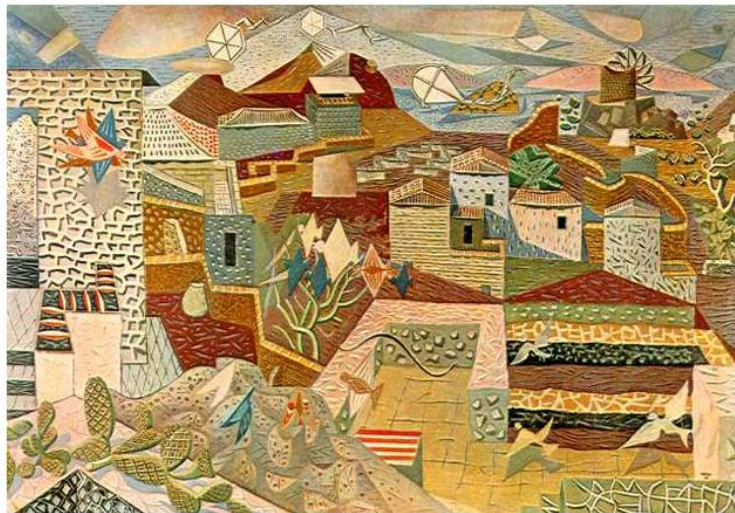


Figure 5. N. Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas, *Large Landscape on Hydra* (1938), oil on canvas, 114x162, Private Collection, Athens.

When talking about architecture, therefore, we can return to the existence of a realistic field, one of at least experimental implementation of visions, through the representation of the actual and sensible, but mainly through its reformulation, as subjectively ideal. It was this field that Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas conquered, giving us the labyrinthine outlines of his dream-like landscapes on Santorini and Hydra. It was here that Takis Zenetos dared to visualise with freedom, the realisation of a helical development for the village of Plakiás and the transcription of stone slabs to the hill of Aghia Galini in south Crete, with the residential units set into the mountain.

Working on the form and the rhythms of our land and our societies means try to understand the inner structure of that human thought, that turns to be necessary in conditions of crisis. Happiness that accompanies knowledge is a kind of freedom for the

artists, for the architects and in this case can lead to the reinscription of that world in our contemporary conditions. For "freedom" is the possibility for everyone to experience his own constant challenge and be able, through his own reality, to recognise his personal and inner responsibility towards a place.

Nikos Skoutelis

Born in Heraklion - Crete (1962). Graduated from I.U.A.V. – Venice (1987). Phd N.T.U.A. (2006) Has worked, in collaboration with Flavio Zanon, in Venice from July 1987 and in Heraklion since 1993 on public and private projects, at the same time participating in architectural competitions. Key works: Eleftherias Square Heraklion (1993-99); proposal for the restoration and reuse of the western Venetian arsenals in Heraklion (1994-96); national resistance monument in Damasta, Heraklion (1996); planning of the seaside front in Stalida, Mallia (2002); Grypareion cultural center, Mykonos(20 02-04); Theoretical works concern: architecture and the city of the renaissance; the theory of restoration and the contribution of history as a tool in architectural composition.