

KENNETH FRAMPTON

For Dimitris Pikionis

*[From Dimitris Pikionis, Architect 1887-1968 'A Sentimental Topography', Architectural Association, London.]*

I will never forget my initial encounter with Pikionis when in 1959 I first visited the Acropolis and found myself walking almost by chance in the astonishing adjacent parks cape of the Philopappou Hill. There I sensed, with great surprise, the almost literal movement of the landfall as my frame was drawn by gravity and by the tactile grip of the paving, up and down the undulating labyrinth of the terrain; a site that was to be experienced as much by the body as by the eyes. More surprising still were the stone-paved way stations and benches and, above all, the pine-wood-framed temenos and pavilion adjacent to the reconstructed Loumbardiaris church. These last seemed as though they had been drawn from Japan, over long eons of time, through Asia and the cultural sieve of Byzantium. I did not know then that the park was not quite finished and that the seventy-two-year-old architect was still active in supervising the work. Nor did close Greek friends of mine bring this work to my attention. When questioned, they knew of it and they knew the architect's name but they did not truly understand the significance of the achievement.

The last thirty years have changed our way of evaluating architecture. We now see back into our century over a much wider and deeper trajectory and while we are by no means anti-Modern, we are reassessing what our Modern culture has been and where we stand in relation to its multifarious strands. Thus figures that once were prominent now recede to a different level and those previously obscure and marginal emerge into the light. Pikionis is surely one of these latter-day luminaries, for his resonant work draws us back at once into a phenomenally concrete world, into a world of revealed radiance, where the 'thingness' of things, to coin Heidegger's phrase, comes into its own. Pikionis' ontic initiation dates from his frequent visits in the twenties to the Rhodakis House on the island of Aegina, a now-ruined 'vernacular' house with naive symbolic embellishments inscribed on its walls, including the legendary 'Ah Vah' - an untranslatable expression of ecstatic relief and joy.

When we look back over the total span of his career we may see it as a subtle oscillation, as a wave that first rose with a Modern reinterpretation of the Greek Neo-Classical spirit, in his Karamanos House of 1925. This wave came to its crest, so to speak, with two unequivocally Modern buildings - the Open Air Theatre and Lycabettus School of 1932 and 1933. Pikionis then broke with the Modern through his reinterpretation of the Macedonian vernacular as finally expressed in his Potamianos House in Philothei, completed in 1955. Somewhere in the sweep of this breaking wave came a point that lay beyond history, wherein the architect arrived at a dematerialised mode of expression that was at once Greek and anti-Greek; Greek in the sense that it was of the place, integrated into the mythos, the landscape, the climate and the way of life; anti-Greek in that much of its inspiration lay elsewhere, remote in space and time, in other far-flung islands, in Honshu and in the archaic pre-Hellenic Aegean under a timeless sun. This popular yet metaphysical syntax began to emerge with his designs for the unbuilt Aixoni housing settlement, near Glyfada, which he started in the early fifties. This manner, surprisingly evocative of the 'wattle' culture of the nomadic Greek Sarakatsan people, reached its clearest formulation in the Arestedis Pourris House built at Maroussi in 1953. In addition to these autochthonous forms, his granddaughter Alexandra

Rapageorgiou has written of the Oriental traces that may be found in his work in the following terms.[\(1\)](#)

"He was stringently against the use of Western forms which are more representative of science and technology, and more tolerant of Eastern forms which are closely related to the ideals of a spiritual world. He admired the scale, form and materials of elements found in Japanese architecture, such as bamboo. He employed similar methods of construction, for example he elevated the ground floor of the Loumbardiaris pavilion and used stone footings at the base of its columns..."

Of the same generation as Le Corbusier and Mies, Pikionis was one of the first architects to realize that a regionally inflected culture of Modern architecture could only be sustained in a post-vernacular age through the admixture of sympathetic alien cultures, just as Greek archaic sculpture had once been fertilized by Egypt. As Alexandra Papageorgiou points out, even the paving of the Philopappou site bears an uncanny relation to the stone causeways of Zen temples and gardens, its patterns breaking across the curvature of the site, denying any perspective anticipation of movement and engendering a seemingly infinite series of seams, galleys and counter changing coursework.

Pikionis' importance today derives from what one might call his onto-topographical sensibility - that is, from his feeling for the interaction of the being with the glyptic form of the site. The first intimations of this sensibility can be found in his 1935 essay 'A Sentimental Topography', first published in the 'Third Eye magazine, wherein he wrote:'

"We rejoice in the progress of our body across the uneven surface of the earth. And our spirit is gladdened by the endless interplay of the three dimensions that we encounter at every step... Here the ground is hard, stony, precipitous, and the soil is brittle and dry. There the ground is level, water surges out of mossy patches. Further on, the breeze, the altitude and the configuration of the ground announce the proximity of the sea... Stone, you compose the lineaments of this landscape. You are the landscape. You are the Temple that is to crown the precipitous rocks of your own Acropolis. For what else does the Temple do but enact the same twofold law, which you serve? ... Is it not because of this concordance, because the same laws are at work in both nature and art, that we are able to see forms of life, forms of nature transformed before our very eyes into forms of art and vice versa? ...

It is this almost ecological insistence on the interdependency of culture and nature, which gives Pikionis' work a critical edge that is as relevant today as it was thirty years ago. For it repudiates our habitual fixation on the freestanding technical and/or aesthetic object, not to mention our destructive, Promethean attitude towards nature that once was beneficial but now is assuming the ominous dimensions of a tragic legacy. While Pikionis realized very little in his sixty years of practice (some six houses, a school, a theatre, a park, a playground and an apartment building) and while he never had to deal with commissions of the socio-technological complexity that characterizes so much of our contemporary building, he nevertheless strove for a symbiotic, ontological architecture, where the identity of the subject and of the society would be redeemed through mutual reverence. Like Constantin Brancusi, Luis Barragan and Carlo Scarpa, Pikionis invariably worked within very modest formats, such as we find in the oneiric playground that he realized for small children in 1965 in the Athenian suburb of Philothei. Close to the 'not yet' of Ernst Bloch, Pikionis' architecture was an architecture of hope. While he was all too aware of the

growing harshness that was enveloping his beloved Greece on every side, he nonetheless evoked a vision of a Mediterranean civilization that was 'other', a Baudelairean sense of luxury shimmering in the light, after the fall of technology.

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## NOTES

[1.](#) - Alexandra Papageorgiou, 'Pikionis and His Work', thesis submitted to the Rhode Island School of Design, Department of Architecture, 1982.