

## **Keynote Speech by Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, Architects**

### **Presentation of the honorary guests by Maria Voyatzaki**

*It is a great pleasure and an honor for me to introduce the next key-note speakers, whom you already know. Dimitris Antonakakis, the founder of the Center for Mediterranean Architecture. You see him in the last five years in this capacity but this is something that he does with great pleasure as a voluntary work offered to his home town, Hania. But his capacity is to be an architect; a famous, well-known, imaginative architect the one half of Atelier 66. I have the honor to have on my right Susana Antonakakis, his life partner, who is the other half of Atelier 66, which is obviously called like this because it was founded in 1966 and ever since it has operated with many partners with this name: The scale of projects Ateliers 66 design vary from tiny residences up to huge public buildings, university campuses, master plans, train stations and so on open-air theaters. Their projects vary also in terms of content and context. What I would like to say as the last thing is that for all these years I have been admiring these people for being great architects. When I recently had the pleasure of translating their lecture into English I realized that they are not only great architects but great poets. I shall leave you to their lecture to find out for yourselves. Susana and Dimitris Antonakakis on "Thoughts on Architecture, the Defined and the Interminable".*

# Thoughts on Architecture

Suzana and Dimitris ANTONAKAKIS  
Architects, Athens, Greece



*Defined and the Interminable:  
The old Venetian Harbor, Hania*



*Defined and Interminable:  
the Byzantine Church*

## Suzana Antonakaki

Through some **thoughts on architecture** we will speak about the **Defined and the Interminable**.

"Diastima" is for the Greeks the word for space, which expresses even on our days the defined void, as well as the interminable area of the sky. **Defined** and **Interminable**: two meanings directly related to architecture. Let us remember the interminable space, which according to P. Michelis constitutes one of the characteristics of the Byzantine church.<sup>1</sup>

The defined void, in which the creation takes place, the limit and its process, constitutes an important point of reference, whether it concerns fiction, music, cinema, painting and of course (for one more reason) architecture.

The terms used for the analysis and criticism of works of art often allude to spatial relationships of movement and stop, solid and void, cyclical, linear or daedal routes, in repetitions which count time and measure space, on planes and volumes, in open and closed forms, organized geometrically or freely.

Italo Calvino, in his *Six American Lectures*, written in 1985 and published after his death entitled «*Six proposals for the next millennium*»<sup>2</sup> (he only managed to finish five of them) he had recorded and analyzed six points which according to him characterize tendencies and define directions for the process of creating literature.

The six points, which the author has chosen with great care in order to project the future of literature, are:

1. Lightness
2. Quickness
3. Exactitude
4. Visibility
5. Multiplicity
6. Consistency

The introduction of the book refers to the texts by Massimi

<sup>1</sup> Παναγιώτη Μιχελή ΑΙΣΘΗΤΙΚΗ ΘΕΩΡΗΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΗΣ ΤΕΧΝΗΣ

<sup>2</sup> Italo Calvino –Lezioni Americane Sei Proposte per il Prossimo Millennio Garzanti Milano 1988-ΕΞΙ ΠΡΟΤΑΣΕΙΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΕΠΟΜΕΝΗ ΧΙΛΙΕΤΙΑ ΕΚΔ. ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΕΙΑ 1995

Piatelli Palamarini, which was published in the newspaper 'Corriere de la Serra' on 20.09.1985.

*...He was talking in the lectures, as someone who is getting ready to demonstrate a new and admirable game, a distribution of playing cards, capable of transferring simply to others the pleasure of being thinking ...*

Reading the same book this summer and enjoying this elaboration we could draw parallels between literature and architecture. As we work for many years now, designing and writing, we think that we have got to some 'principles', which constitute some kind of guidelines which direct us from the concept to its treatment and its materialisation.

They are some departure points for our work that with time have created an esoteric 'typology' which creates the conditions for cooperation in teamwork.

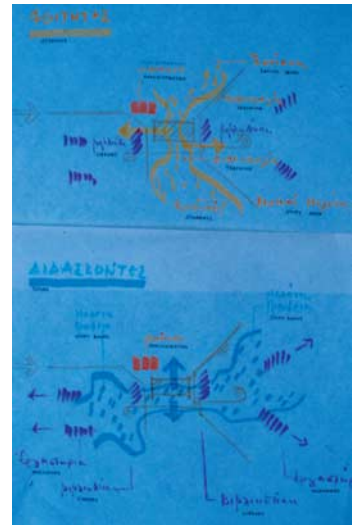
### Dimitris Antonakakis

I shall attempt to illustrate the approach that Suzana described using as an example the project for the two faculties of the Polytechnic of Crete.

A diagram, which is adapted to the local data and defines in space the areas of activities as these are prescribed by the brief, precedes the model. In this phase the open spaces are defined by the volumes of the buildings. It is more important to us to relate and to organize accordingly the two opposite sides of the two different buildings which define the open space, than the facades of the building itself. We consider the open space –the square- as a larger hall with no roof on it. The buildings which define it are its walls and they ought to obey to common rhythms, common scale, relevant materials. Their treatment on these buildings comes later as a variation of the homogeneity of the whole. 'Typology' in this particular case refers to the entities of indoor spaces which are repeated with variations, as well as to the open spaces that contribute to this relation of the entities.

### Suzana Antonakaki

Although the projection of an art onto another art, is often considered by theoreticians a risky process, which can only cause confusion (I would like to remind you that Sartre supported such view with confidence in his essay "What is literature?"<sup>3</sup>) nevertheless (bearing in mind the possibilities



*The diagram for the Polytechnic of Crete, 1982*



*The model for the Polytechnic of Crete, 1982*

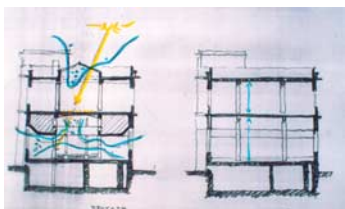


*The Central Square, Polytechnic of Crete, 1982*

<sup>3</sup> Jean Paul Sartre *Que c'est que la Littérature?* Ed Gallimard. Idées 1948



*Ioniki Bank, Heraklion Crete, Ground Floor, 1987*



*Ioniki Bank, Heraklion Crete, Section after the intervention (left) and before the intervention (right), 1987*



*Faliro Residencies, Sequence of proposals for extension, 1954-67-72*



*Faliro Residencies, View from the street*

offered by technology as well as the general attitude that artists have adopted on approaching the arts) and continuing on the playful mood of Calvino, I think that it is interesting to take the risk and search a few correspondences between architecture and Calvino's views on literature.

Let us consider these comments a brief introduction and a starting point on our problematic and the accumulated doubts which stimulate our architectural work in *Atelier 66*, for many years, but also views which to a great extent represent paradoxically the current scene of architecture on our days...

These are the tendencies that have appeared on the horizon, with regard to the design activity, as well as with regard to the brief and the treatment of limits influencing this way the style of the projects both in terms of design and in terms of realisation.

Italo Calvino's sensitivity for the cities and their inhabitants is known from his book 'Invisible Cities':

The city, an exceptionally complex symbol, gave him the possibility to express the tension between the geometric logic and the mosaic of the human existence. This relationship of geometry with the human activities, in everyday life and on a special day is and might continue to be a successful definition of architecture.

### **Dimitris Antonakakis**

This relationship of geometry with the developing human behaviour is expressed in the Greek architectural reality either with the regeneration of old buildings, or with successive extensions to the existing constructions, which transform their geometry, adapting it to the new needs of their inhabitants. Two examples of this rich in experience type of projects are: the first one, the Ionian Bank Branch, in Heraklion, Crete. Here the intervention to the section of the slope illustrates the effectiveness of the rearrangement of the regenerated indoor space.

The second example illustrates with elegance the geometric transformations of an existing building (1956) with the sequential extensions which we executed following the, increasing with time, needs of a family.

### **Suzana Antonakaki**

It is neither in our intentions, nor in the constraints of the time available to deal with each one of these interesting themes, which could certainly not be isolated but interrelated. The

author with his chosen references has written amazing texts on literature, always reminding us that each one characteristic is in pair with its opposite.

At the end of reading this book, we realize that the remarks on the style of a piece of literature are, to a great extent, applicable to architecture. Meanings, repetitions, spatial and time distances, connections in which precision is necessary as well as an open narration for the reader to interpret.

If we think, however, that in architecture the "**Topos**"- place (whatever that entails) the **brief** and the **construction**, are even today, to a great extent, the axes which determine the design activity, we would realize that the six points by Calvino have to do with the tendencies of our times and the principles which drive architecture and its possible projections in the future.

According to the poet Seferis<sup>4</sup>, words are like ships. They depart for new destinations and return to their departure ports. In the same way "architectures" some times return from their trips with valuable loads, that are useful elements adaptable to the place they return to, and some other times return with useless stuff. As you can appreciate these are the choices of the poet – architect, which judge the quality and the future of the texts, built or written.

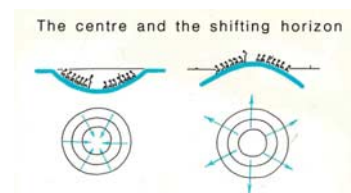
In an attempt to search for the driving force of our architectural thinking and aiming to make it more understandable, beyond slides which always show an incomplete reality, we will also project some of our compositional views that, we think, make it possible to relate to some of Calvino's points.

From his thoughts, I would stop to the one, in which the author, by recognizing literature as an existential function, considers the pursuit of **lightness** (with content far from frivolous) as a reaction to the weight or load of life.

I would associate this characteristic with our choice to reorganize the brief and to recompose units, which permit the interpenetration of indoor and outdoor space in a way that releases some weight from the composition. Scale and the treatment of limits are also associated with this characteristic.

As the author claims, when he elaborates on the proposition on lightness it does not mean that he underestimates gravity; what concerns him is the dual relationship weight-lightness, in the *twin phenomenon*, to use Aldo Van Eyck's terminology.<sup>5</sup>

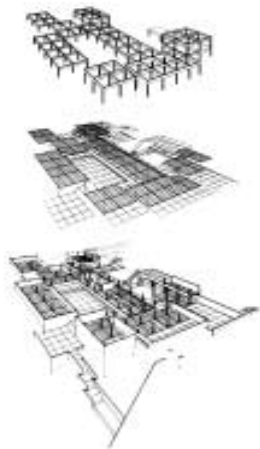
Let's remember at this point, the drawing with the centripetal



Aldo Van Eyck's analysis on the weight-lightness relationship

<sup>4</sup> G. Seferis Dokimes vol.1 Ed. Ikaros 1974

<sup>5</sup> Aldo Van Eyck Ethniki Pinakothiki, National Gallery Athens 1983



*Hios Museum, 1965 The Organization of the Construction and the Use of the Grid*



*Hios Museum, 1965 Access from street level*



*House in Oxylythos*



*House in Oxylythos, View of the master bedroom*

forces, which direct movement and stop towards the center and the centrifugal forces as they open up to the open horizon.

This proposition by Aldo Van Eyck refers indirectly to the relationship between weight and lightness: the stocky volume that opens up to the horizon direct the spectators to look at the infinite and in the other case, the two opposite hill sides define the void attracting the stare of the spectators.

This reference, which is directly related to stare, the movement of the eye, portrays with distinctness the relationship *see and be seen* which has been analyzed by J. P. Vernant.<sup>6</sup>

The mutual stare alludes to relationships between theatricality and architecture.

With our means and possibilities, we attempt in our work to break the solid structures, in the buildings we design and built: residencies, schools, museums, settlements or hotels. Our intention starts from our intensive search for transparency and interpenetration of solid and void, but also for ways in which our works can touch the landscape, which will enhance it, allowing it to pass in or through the built volumes.

### **Dimitris Antonakakis**

On this intention, which you have probably distinguished already in our drawings for the Polytechnic of Crete, we elaborate systematically on large as well as small scale interventions. Two examples here:

In the first example of the Museum in Hios, the areas required by the brief surround, as they open spaces, forming a series of internal courtyards, and multiplying the area of exhibition and studio-laboratory space.

The second example, a small summer house at Oxylythos, one of many houses that we have design along the same lines of varying the volumes and their use, is organized in alternate parallel zones of indoor and outdoor spaces. The landscape, in this case, constitutes a great part of these houses as the open space is part of the concept and is not added to it after it is formulated.

### **Suzana Antonakaki**

In parallel with the **successive zones** which we explore in the synthesis of small scale projects –residencies- but also in small complexes –settlements and so on, we aim, when that is

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Pierre Vernant Mythe et Pensée chez les Grecs Maspero 1965

possible to 'open' the closed element to the interminable.

I would like to stress, at this point, the great importance we place on the **movement** as an almost autonomous element during our design activity.

The street with all its complexities, **the external and internal street** as a meeting point and **journey** is one of the fundamental themes, which articulate from the start the determinants, and the tissue of the composition. (Barlos, settlement in Distomo)

### Dimitris Antonakakis

In this early, austere and utopian, to some extent for its times, example (this could be perhaps the reason it was never completed) we attempted to introduce to a sloppy site a settlement for the work force of an industry in Distomo; a proposal which opposed to the brief requirements to design three blocks of flats. In this ambitious design there are three alternate types of residences and their variations, sufficient to adapt to the different positions in the layout of the settlement, and limited to allow a kind of standardization. These three types, organized in parallel zones, where the private open space and the public open space with the zones of the enclosed volumes of the residences alternate, they ascend on the slope forming an articulate residential complex. The public space zones –the pedestrians routes- serve, with a number of alternative entrances, the residences which lie on either side of their zones, and which open up systematically to other in-between zones of private open spaces which include their inner courtyards.



*Residential Complex, Distomo, 1969*

### Suzana Antonakaki

Similar is our intention to juxtapose the **monolithic gravity** of the built volumes by the introduction of **a defined or endless void** of the outdoor spaces, in complexes, which form more complex entities.

There are some buildings which belong to the ambiguous category: building - non-building rather built landscape one could say, as: the open-air theatre of the Forest in Thessaloniki, as we have designed it. It was finally built losing some of the special characteristics of the treatment of limits, which, in our opinion, would give it, the necessary vagueness in a well-calculated complex, where the element of distortion of a self-explicit geometry stresses the penetration of the theatre in the landscape, creating relationships and proportions which allude to Calvino's text on precision.....



*Open-air Forest Theatre in Thessaloniki*

Our proposition on lightness was sustained on the restless search for the diffusion and the impregnation of the built form with tiny pieces of infinite sky as well as the adjacent or distant landscape.

Our intentions of course, have been let down often by bad construction, or by the hostile attitude of the inhabitants towards the building, or even due to our wrong appreciation of reality and real needs.

### **Dimitris Antonakakis**

In this example – a three-hundred roomed hotel at Heraklion, Crete- in order to avoid the feeling of a gigantic volume, we broke it into wings, forming a new artificial landscape with some level changes so that all wings can have a relationship with the sea while nature would penetrate them. In an effort to facilitate the 'legibility' of space, we used a palette of colors characteristic of Mediterranean settlements. These colors gave scale to the necessarily large-scale volumes which inevitably emerged from the brief requirements. Along the same lines, we elaborated on the cantilevers of the rooms by alternating their balustrades and the respective proportions, so that there is variety in the big-scale facades.



*Lyttos Hotel, Heraklion, Crete, 1974-76,  
View from the Entrance*



*Lyttos Hotel, Heraklion, Crete, 1974-76,  
Rooms*

### **Suzana Antonakaki**

The briefs and the special conditions, have not always permitted the **fulfillment of these intentions**, that is the penetration of the void in the body of the building, such as the cases of the blocks of flats in the urban tissue, where we created, with the proportions of the plan and sections, internal spaces, with characteristics of open air spaces and we treated the limits with these presuppositions.

Examples in this direction are the Benaki Street, and the smaller block of flats at Philopappou Hill, Zannas residence.

### **Dimitris Antonakakis**

Apart from designing the entrance and the core of vertical circulation of the block of flats of Benaki Street, the interior space of the flats develops in most cases on more than level. This arrangement, the analogous arrangement of openings and the two-aspect reception areas –the living room- apart from their advantage to achieve excellent ventilation, remind us of a kind of internal courtyards, to which the smaller units of the more private rooms of the flat open up; the master bedroom and the children's room.



*Block of Flats, Benaki Street,  
Athens, 1972*



*Block of Flats, Benaki Street,  
Athens, 1972, Main entrance*



*Block of Flats, Benaki Street,  
Athens, 1972, Interior*

In Zanna's residence, the children's courts are placed on the ground floor and have independent entrances. This is the reason for their arrangement in relation to the pavement. The main entrance of the couple ends on the upper floor, to a *piano nobile* with high headroom, which as an enclosed courtyard creates the reception space and its services, with a study space on a mezzanine.

### Suzana Antonakaki

Calvino's analysis on the point of **precision**, refers to the light feather, which was used as a weight on the weight scales for the souls of the ancient Egyptians – the hieroglyphic Maat (goddess of scales) implied the length of a brick which was 33 centimeters but also the **basic note** of the flute. It is worth remarking, that the weighing that refers to the soul, the lightness of a feather, as well as the reference to a **tone for the music** or a, **measure for construction** have the same symbolism...

**Precision** alludes in summary, to *defined design*, to *linguistic clarity* and to *images worth to remember*, charged with an **esoteric necessity**. Images that have the power to capture the attention alluding to a *plethora of probable signified*, remote from the well known phantasmagoric games with which, we are uninterruptedly bombarded from everywhere, the cloud of images that surrounds us and is blown up, leaving us with a feeling of emptiness.

Calvino's analysis on the point of precision becomes very interesting in architectural terms, where he distinguishes the concept of infinite **-infini-** from the concept of indefinite **-indefini-** and writes:



*Zanna's Residence*



*Zanna's Residence, Living room*



Atelier of a painter, Aegina, 1990



Two residences in Heraklion, Crete, 1999, Interior



Two residences in Heraklion, Crete, 1999, the Courtyard

*I would like to refer to my preference to geometric forms, symmetries, consequences, combinability, mathematic proportions, I would like to explain the things I wrote, with guide my faith in the idea of measure, of limit...Perhaps though it is this idea of precision which also attracts the idea of the absence of the end: the sequence of integer numbers, the Euclidean lines*

He goes on to refer to the obsession that conquers him so that he limits the spectrum of his themes into smaller spectra, and the obsession for the detail that conquers him reminding Flaubert's words that good **God is in the detail**, which was also repeated by Mies Van der Rohe.

We have often felt this need of interminable search of the small, which is contained within a bigger form and in the elaboration, which blurs the roles of the small and the big, the open and the close, the public and the private. It is perhaps the search for the indetermination in explicitness, which is expressed in many ways such as the preciousness in the outdoor space and the sharpness in the indoor one, or the study of movement in order to create dilemmas of choice and intentions of labyrinthine character.

In this relationship of our architecture with precision, we have practised from our student times, with the catalytic influence of James Speyer, who –as an open-minded apprentice of Mies Van der Rohe- taught us, the importance of moderation and measure which determines with precision the proportions, but also the importance that **deviations stress in these normalities**.

### **Dimitris Antonakakis**

In these last examples, which follow the same principle we used bear cement blocks with color in the mortar and we obeyed to the constraints which were imposed by their size.

The first example is a painter's atelier in Aegina. It consists of a large and tall volume, the studio space, which is surrounded by a zone of ancillary spaces and outdoor galleries which function as protective 'wrap' in which the principal space, the core of the project, emerges.

The second example includes two residences at Heraklion, Crete placed in the space available so that they form courtyards of a greater or lesser degree of privacy, common or separated for both residences.

Once again in this example, the organization of the residences in zones which accommodate movement, is evident. Such a zone –gallery- oriented towards South distributes activities to

different levels in both residences. These levels, in turn, open up to protected terraces or courtyards; a series of spaces crossed by open or protected movement or are adjacent to two-aspect transparent spaces of smooth transition from the open to the protected or the indoor space of the two residences.

### **Suzana Antonakaki**

To this education we owe the practice of applied- λόγος discourse and the open interpretation of the grid in architectural composition. A pace, which is selected in order to allude to measures which correspond to elements repeated in the building, a pace which measures vertical as well as horizontal surfaces, indoor or outdoor spaces and it is therefore diffused in all the volume....

With architectural terms we search a vocabulary and the articulation of our **own language**, which will allow us, to apply an **open typology**, which is useful as a starting point, for its adaptation to the particularities that appear each time, due to different reasons: financial, local, constructional, or even due to the brief...

However, we never stop considering, that we found something that will solve all our problems. This is the charm of architecture. It is a domain for the investigation of properties which coexist influencing each other analogous to what Calvino refers.

"Training" in architecture in an attempt to summarize all those things that for years we have been trying to articulate with our work, fighting with tough reality, with the indifference that surrounds us, with the inflation of the empty image that devours the variable landscape, with a ruthless bureaucracy that only rarely has a face and escapes from the neutral fear of responsibility, is an extremely painful experience.

.... And if one could think that we live in this magic land, Greece and we speak a language, which has sustained its continuity and its *stemonologic vocabulary* from Homer's times. Words such 'thalassa' for the sea or the word 'plhiggi' for wound, which have been left, untouched.

Closing by returning to the texts, I would say that we architects could with all the downfalls of architecture, as we experience it everyday, derive the power from the strength of the Greek language throughout the centuries. Its poetic infrastructure, its *assimilative confidence*, recognizable especially on Crete has proved that it receives and assimilates the particularities of the Greek language, which according to M. Z. Kupidakis are:<sup>7</sup>

*The ability to abstract*

*The plasticity*

*The richness of meanings*

*The competitive polytypy*

A proof of the invention and the need of the Greeks to escape from dry mathematics, is that in order to express the particularities of individuals they invent thousands of names, what M. Kopidakis has called idioprosopia. In a speech entitled "*Language is our home country*", he refers to some of the fifty names that Isiodos used to name Nirihides: Ploto, Amphitrite, Pontoporia, Sao, Gallini, Glafki, Kymothoi...

The difficulties that architecture comes across are infinite, in this dual road of wish for legibility and plurality, for the design and materialisation of spaces that are distinguished for their '**narrativity**' and which allow us to fascinate others, beyond our own self, spaces that offer what inhabitation really ought to be. To be poetic as Heidegger<sup>8</sup> so characteristically has described....

In this difficult route that architecture has taken it is exposed to everything, from inflation and deprivation, thousands of mute images, verbosity of materials, bulimia and unlimited exhibitionism, arrogance or indolence of power, pedantic attitudes and fear of responsibility for the interpretation of the laws and the most painful; indifference that leads to aggressiveness and hostility to the bodies of buildings that have been designed with love...

Nevertheless we carry on regardless to hope and to dream. Let's not forget that the word ονειροπόλος -'dreamy'- has been left also untouched from Homer's times...

*We would like to thank Maria Voyatzaki for translating and editing our text.*

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<sup>7</sup> M. Kopidakis *Language is our home country* Mikros Naffilos Heraklio 2000

<sup>8</sup> M. Heideger *Essais et conferences* Gallimard 1958