

Graphic Mimesis. Representation of the Landscape in Dimitris Pikionis' Xenia Hotel and Alberto Ponis' Casa Hartley

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Abstract

One of the most challenging aspects of the architectural project is the representation of the landscape, particularly when dealing with the graphic representation of abrupt natural enclaves. In the field of contemporary architecture, technical documentation often employs abstractions to illustrate the relationship between construction and landscape in a synthetic way. The terrain is conceptualized using contour lines, and the vegetation, paths while other elements of the site are simplified to highlight the position of the intervention. Notwithstanding the aforementioned general tendency, the figures of Dimitris Pikionis (Athens, 1887-1968) and Alberto Ponis (Genoa, 1933-) stand out as two architects who have distanced themselves from these conventional tendencies of representation by virtue of their faithful definition of the landscape. Their projects, situated in the Mediterranean basin, are characterized by the topographical complexity to which they adapt. It is therefore crucial to understand their particular graphic approach in order to fully comprehend the development and subsequent understanding of their interventions. In this context, the landscape representations used by Pikionis and Ponis in the Xenia Hotel (Delphi, 1951-56) and Casa Hartley (Costa Paradiso, 1977) projects are analyzed as paradigmatic models, demonstrating, through their graphics an exceptional approach, to safeguard the landscape through the harmonious integration of natural and man-made elements.

Keywords: topography, in-situ drawing, Mediterranean basin, Mediterranean architecture, landscape.

Introduction

The interpretation of the landscape in the architectural project, and more specifically the representation of its forms, necessitates a reflexive effort to effectively communicate the relationships between its different elements. It is frequently observed that this information is simplified in order to reflect the architecture in greater detail, resulting in documentation that fails to convey the potential of certain landscapes and the necessity for a sensitive approach to their management. Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance to ascertain the characteristics of these landscapes during the project development phase, particularly when working in areas of abrupt enclaves where the topographical features dictate the optimal implantation strategy. In this regard, several contemporary architects, including

the Greek Dimitris Pikionis (Athens, 1887-1968) and the Italian Alberto Ponis (Genoa, 1933), have distinguished themselves through their unique approach and profound interest in comprehending, unravelling, and encapsulating the landscape element within their projects. Both architects concentrate on meticulously mapping the existing natural elements, including rocks and soil formations, as well as the diverse array of vegetation. The graphical representation of architecture and the environment is characterized by a similar level of detail, with the two elements being balanced to the extent that they become indistinguishable from one another.

An exhaustive analysis that demonstrates a desire to understand the details of the place through constant work

in the enclave itself, while simultaneously allowing for the sensitive adaptation of projects to the inherent complexity of the landscape. This concept is especially pertinent in the case of the Xenia Hotel (1951-56) in Delphi and the Casa Hartley (1970) in Costa Paradiso, as designed by Pikionis and Ponis, respectively. These projects demonstrate the significance that architects ascribe to the representation of the landscape. This is evidenced by the fact that the development of both projects was informed by an in-depth analysis of the surrounding area.

This article studies the conception process of these examples through their distinctive graphic representation, with the objective of understanding the role of the landscape and its elements in the conceiving of these interventions. In order to gain insight into the conception process of these examples, the archives of both architects were consulted. The archive of Dimitris Pikionis was accessed virtually through the digital platform provided by the Benaki Museum [1], while the archive of Alberto Ponis was accessed in person by visiting his studio in Palau, Sardinia. In order to complete the information and gain a deeper understanding of the projects, we consulted the available published works on both architects, as well as conducting personal interviews with Alberto Ponis during visits to the Sardinian island.

Xenia Hotel by Dimitris Pikionis

A comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the built environment and the surrounding landscape is a recurring theme in the history of Greek architecture. Since classical times, construction has been based on the concept of natural values, which posits that buildings should not dominate their surroundings, but rather be in harmony with them. The objective is to achieve a landscape perfection that transcends mere perception and incorporates the existing connections with the elements of the territory itself, thereby expressing its *genius loci* [Jellicoe 1995, p. 117]. Pikionis upholds these classical principles of connection with the landscape and maintains them in a dogmatic manner throughout his professional career, both in the configuration of the buildings and in the determination of the visual angles.

From an early age, Pikionis showed a profound interest in painting, particularly the work of Konstantinos Parthenis (1878-1967), whom he considered to be his first pupil and to whom he mainly owed the opportunity to study



Fig. 1. Delfos' Sanctuary in relation with the landscape (Photography by Lara Redondo González 2019).

drawing and painting in Munich [Pikionis 1987, p. 27] [1]. This fascination and training in the plastic arts would have a notable influence on his work, in which he would pour all his artistic baggage and knowledge of the conception of space, composition, rhythm and aesthetic sensitivity. These aspects are a constant in all his architectural production, situated at a point between construction and painting. The result of this approach to the design process is the extensive collection of drawings that has been preserved, in which a common thread can be seen to condition his interventions: namely, the desire to understand and enhance the Greek landscape and the elements that make it unique. Along these lines, his project for the Xenia Hotel, located in the western part of Delphi, a small-town clinging to the steep slope of Mount Parnassus, is particularly noteworthy. The plot where the project is located is at its lowest point and connects with the main road that leads, just a few meters away, to the old Sanctuary. Its landscape is characterized, firstly, by its topographical complexity; a deep valley cleft by winding roads that connect the few inhabited units, whose architectures practically hang from the terrain and sometimes look out over the Gulf of Corinth. Secondly, because of the physical and symbolic presence of the Sanctuary, which significantly conditions the landscape image (fig. 1). In this context, Pikionis designed the hotel with the objective of responding to the nascent increase in tourism that was occurring in the 1950s [2]. Two decades after his unrealized project for the Delphic Centre (1934),

the architect was presented with the opportunity to apply his knowledge of this site, considering the landscape elements as determining factors in the rules of composition. The pre-existences are regarded as elements linked to the person passing through the site, connected with it aesthetically and emotionally, giving importance to the individual in the landscape. It is for this reason that they constitute the primary object of study in terms of their potential relations with the future incorporation, with a view to establishing a harmonious connection between the project (artifice) and the surrounding landscape (nature).

A review of the numerous drawings produced for this project reveals that Pikionis prioritizes the pre-existences over the architectural materiality itself. Konstantinidis, who was his assistant for a time around 1949, states that Pikionis considered elevations to be of particular importance in his way of composing [Tsiambaos 2018, p. 144]. In this regard, the elevation and perspective drawings for the Xenia Hotel consistently contextualize the project within the landscape, irrespective of the level of definition. From the initial sketches, which depicted the architecture in simple geometrical forms and swift strokes, the mountainous profile of Parnassus, the complex shapes of the terrain and its vegetation were depicted in detail (fig. 2). However, in the case of the present project and subsequently in his intervention in the area around the Acropolis (1951-58), Pikionis came to understand the ground plan as the primary element of the project. A plan designed: "as an elevation, in a painterly mode" [Tsiambaos 2018, p. 144] [3], connecting with Konstantinidis' initial assessment. In this instance, the emphasis is not on typology or the organization of spaces, but on achieving a specific visual form that is: "clear and pure, readable in photographic fidelity" [Tsiambaos 2018, p. 144]. For this reason, the floor plan is significantly influenced by the pre-existing structures and the various points of view from which to observe them.

In some of the initial sketches of this project, the architectural form is absent and instead represented as a trace on the ground (fig. 3). In the initial plan representations of the complex, the construction is shown as a void, while the vegetation, paths, rocks and even the ground are analyzed and depicted with great precision. In contrast to the abstract representation of the architectural elements, the artist employed a realistic technique in his depiction of the site, utilizing shading to accentuate the effects of perspective. This graphic dichotomy, where the artifice is blurred in order to show exhaustively the particularities of the site,

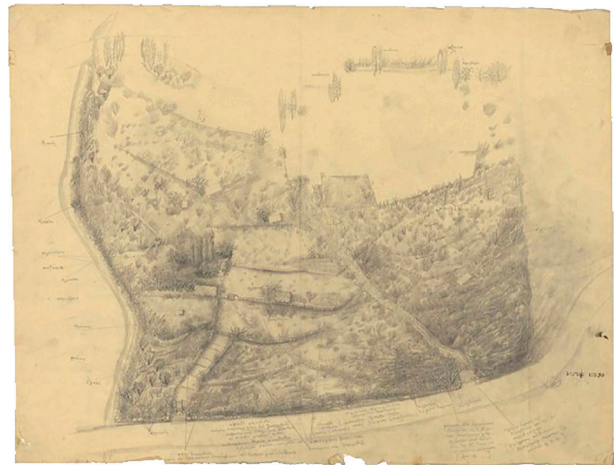
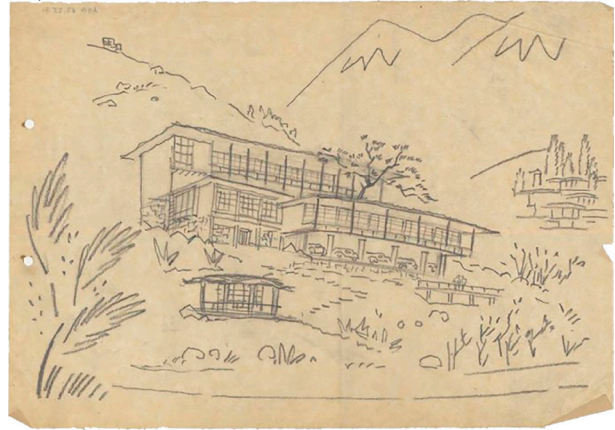


Fig. 2. D. Pikionis, first sketches of Xenia Hotel with the silhouette of Mount Parnassus in the background (Benaki Museum, ANA_67_25_71 1951-55).

Fig. 3. D. Pikionis, detailed site plan with the silhouette of Xenia Hotel (Benaki Museum, ANA_67_25_03 1951-55).

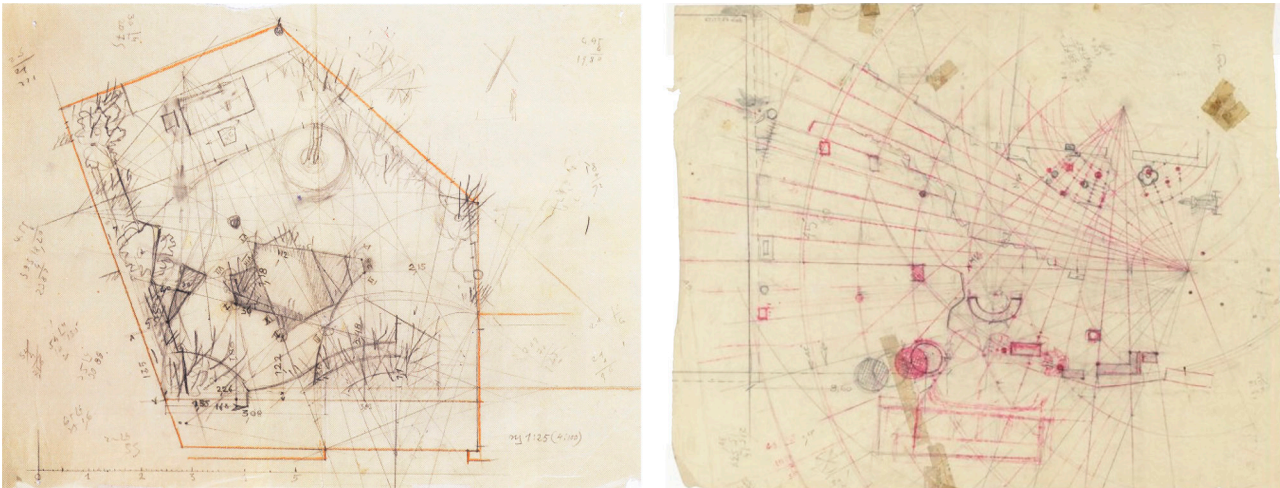


Fig. 4. Left: D. Pikionis, geometric diagram of the interior space of Efthymiadou House in Athens (Benaki Museum, ANA_67_24_01 1948-49). Right: D. Pikionis, geometric diagram of St. Dimitrios Loumbardiaris' area in Athens (Benaki Museum, ANA_67_55_37 1954).

is aligned with the architect's idea of the way of understanding the landscape. A process of reconnaissance of the enclave *in situ* to discover sequences of points of view, meticulously selected to establish a dialogue with the most relevant elements of the surrounding area. This technique had already been initiated a few years earlier in the project for the house of the sculptor Efthymiadou (1948-49), which he subsequently employed to its fullest extent in his aforementioned intervention on the Acropolis (fig. 4).

The documentation outlining this process would serve Pikionis as a graphic base, designed on the site designed on the site: "like a Borgia map" [Furlenga 2023, p. 77] [5]. On it he notes the existing elements and vegetation such as the olive trees (ελιές) and sketches a first exterior proposal. In his subsequent drawings, he completes this base with a series of red lines that correspond to different project elements and compositional tools (fig. 5).

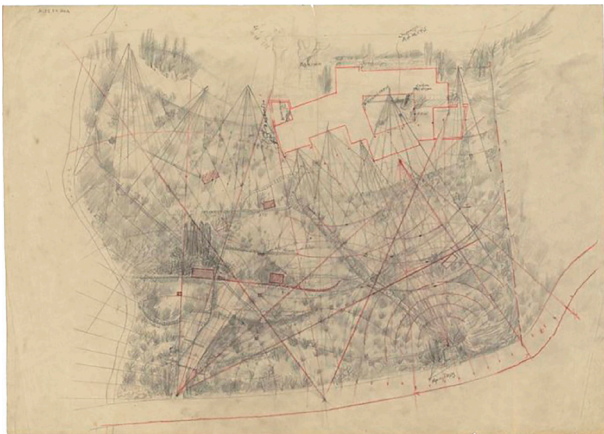
On the one hand, the architect delineates the perimeter of the hotel's ground plan, which is still undetailed, but with annotations indicating the type of planting, such as: "a vine, ivy, or invisible thyme" [García-Sánchez 2011, p. 116]. In addition, the silhouette and the remainder of the plot feature a number of focal points, with red lines emanating from each to indicate the visual cones. These angles: "serve to verify every possible relationship between the building

and the landscape, framing the main emerging elements of a microcosm comprising trees, paths, housing, access and rock, which are subtly modelled by the architect's hand" [Furlenga 1999, p. 112]. These points indicate directions and suggest concentric arcs that establish a web of visual connections, influencing the position of both the main building and the various auxiliary constructions.

This particular way of designing is based on the application of mathematical models and compositional systems identified in the research of the architect Konstantinos A. Doxiadis (1913-1975), to whom he had the opportunity to transmit his knowledge and ideas as a professor at the National Polytechnic University of Athens (NTUA). These studies are finally collected in his book, *Architectural Space in Ancient Greece* (1937) [Doxiadis 1972, p. 2] [6], and are based on the layout of the enclosures of the classical temples and their geometrical organization. Pikionis studies and defines these parameters of visual space organization not using Cartesian coordinates, but by considering the speed of human movement and the hypothetical movements of the observer. This demonstrates that each of the lines and directions observed in his drawings is indicative of a sophisticated control of movement and points of view, with the objective of creating an oriented perception of the landscape.

As a result of this singular way of composing, the volume of the Xenia Hotel is fragmented into different parts to adapt to the topography, a strategy already employed by Pikionis in other earlier projects such as the Pefkakia School (1931-1932) or the aforementioned Efthymiadou House. In its original version, the hotel is organized in four blocks of rooms other blocks for the lobby, restaurant, and lounge, arranged at different levels following the slope of the land [Frelenga 1999, p. 112] [7]. Each of them is situated on the ground and rotated to orientate the perspectives according to the angles of vision represented (fig. 6). All these blocks are configured around two courtyards whose proportions and dimensions also respond to the analysis of the site. The first of these acts as an access atrium and is completely open to the surrounding landscape, whereas the second is enclosed by the restaurant wing, which is situated on a lower level. This configuration allows the block of rooms situated behind it to still enjoy the views. This concern for visual connections is also transferred to the private spaces where Pikionis incorporates wooden benches in the loggias of the rooms as: "a place where this visual relationship is privately consummated, which becomes a choral experience from the large openings of the collective spaces" [Frelenga 1999, p. 112].

Fig. 5. D. Pikionis, application of Doxiadis' method in Xenia Hotel plan (Benaki Museum, ANA_67_25_04).



Casa Hartley by Alberto Ponis

Alberto Ponis relocated to the island of Sardinia after working in London between 1960-1964 (Ponis 2003, p. 14). His approach to the cultural and physical environment was based on a total ignorance of the Sardinian imaginary, a lack of knowledge that he addressed through a detailed, investigation travelling through the landscapes of the island [8]. Upon his arrival on the island, Ponis promptly set out to explore the territory in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Sardinian culture, its diverse landscape and the distinctive characteristics of its vernacular architecture [9]. During his trips, he documented the vegetation, rocks, and regional constructions through graphic and photographic procedures. This approach to understanding the local context informed a distinctive ideation process based on on-site work, which was subsequently applied in the design of his holiday houses. Many of these are situated within the rocky topographies of Costa Paradiso and Punta Sardegna tourist resorts.

The initial moments of each commission were characterised by constant visits to the site. During these excursions, Ponis carried out an in-depth analysis, which was used in all phases of the project as a basis for adapting the holiday homes to the abrupt topography in which he was intervening. Throughout the expeditions, he analysed the

Fig. 6. Exterior view of Xenia Hotel in relation with Delphi landscape [Frelenga 1999, p. 113].



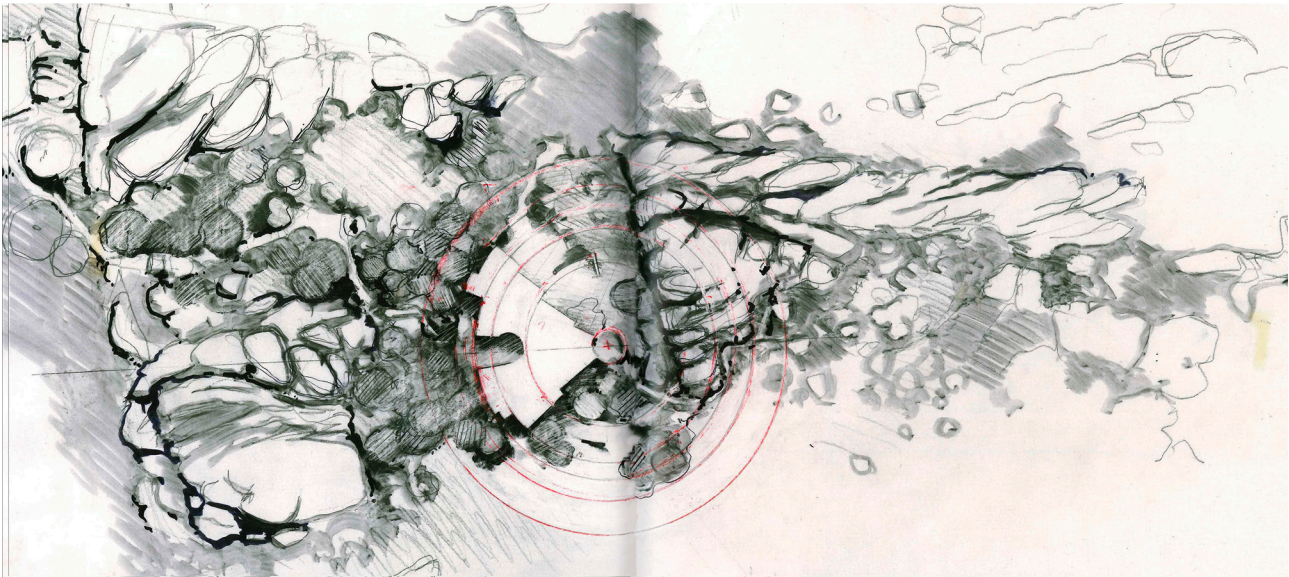
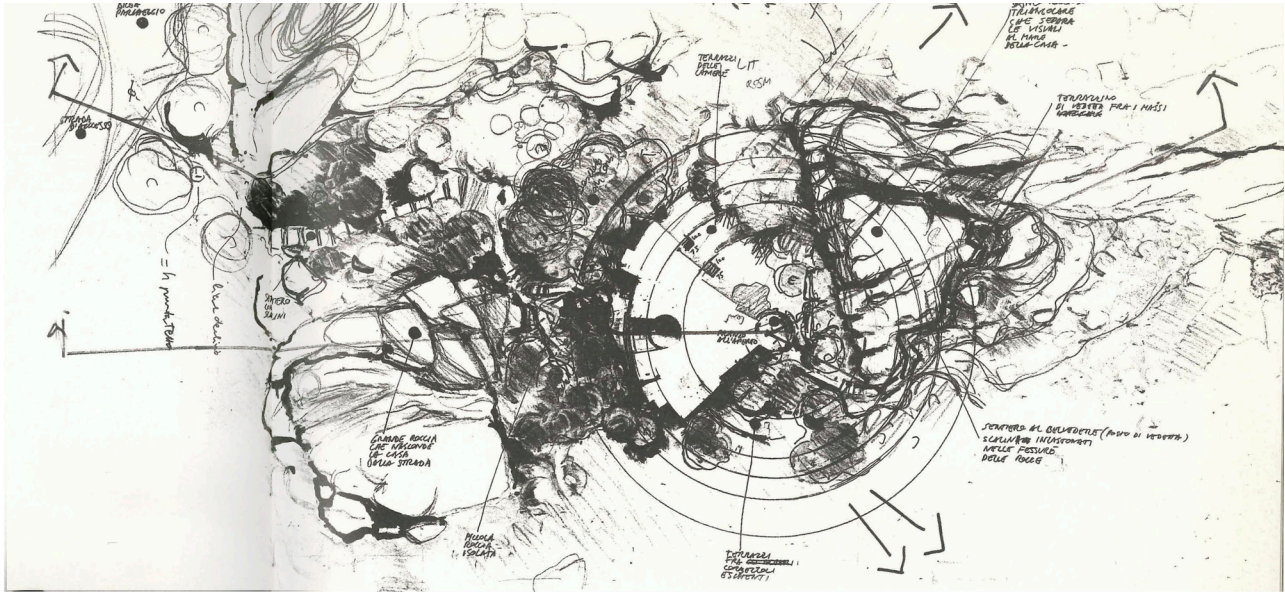


Fig. 7. Initial sketches of Casa Hartley. Top [Brandolini 2003, pp.60-61], bottom [Brandolini 2014, pp. 128, 129].

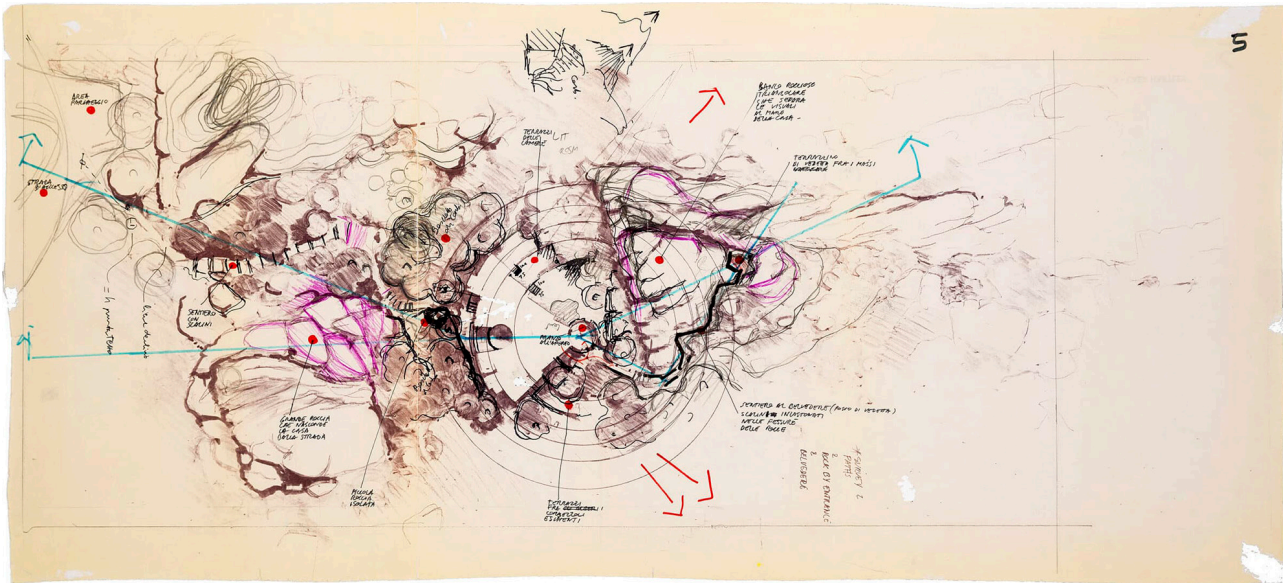


Fig. 8. Analysis site plan and sketch of the project [Brandolini 2021].

small Mediterranean vegetation –or *macchia*– identifying the unique elements while mapping, formally and dimensionally, the closest rocks to the site. The identification of each site was compiled in sketches as well as indicated on the site by marking the references and areas to be worked with stakes, ropes, and stones [Ponis 2023, p. 2]. The documents that make up the data collection, usually consist of a few sketches on folded paper and brief notes in the margins of the sheets, have not survived for the vast majority of his projects. As a result, some of the projects present unlinked information which hardens the understatement of the ideation of the project. For this reason, other projects where the documentation has been correctly preserved, such as Casa Hartley, commissioned to the architect around 1970 by an American consul and his wife, are of great value.

Among the documents that have survived, there are three very similar plans that convey an apparently similar information differing in their nuances (fig. 7). Despite the fact that they seem to be drawn up after the completion of the house, or at least during its construction, they all succeed to communicate the project details developed

during its various stages. However, the one that could be considered the first, due to the dubitative graphics of the proposal and the number of annotations describing the peculiarities of the enclave, is the one that brings together the most representative characteristics of the intervention. Its superimposed lines condense the details of the project, the character of the environment and the subjective vision of the architect (fig. 8).

This first planimetry shows the architecture embedded between three granite monoliths of Costa Paradiso, a tourist resort in the municipality of Trinità d'Agultu [10]. The site is characterised by an abrupt soil with continuous irregularities, forming valleys, ridges and cliffs that complicate visual orientation when immersed in it while providing, at the same time, the necessary privacy [Brandolini 2014, p.124]. In the plot where the Casa Hartley is located, the: “bizarre, sharply pointed rock pinnacles, set close together, look as if they had once been the nests of prehistoric animals or the unidentifiable fossils remains of some creature that once lived there” [Brandolini 2014, p.124]. As a consequence of the irregular orography, the development of the project requires constant work on

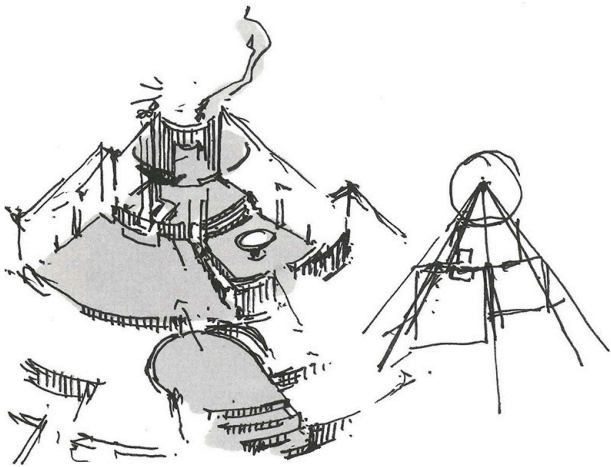
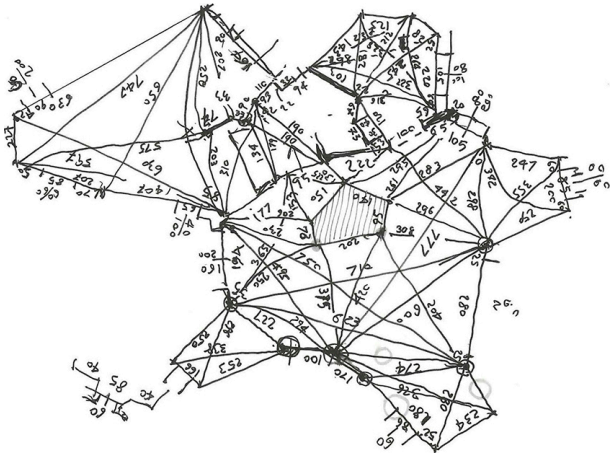


Fig. 9. Triangulation plan in Casa Ivan (1994) [Brandolini 2014, p. 181].

Fig. 10. Radial composition diagram of Casa Hartley [Brandolini 2014, p. 131].

site, especially in the first phases when the elements of the landscape are recognised.

The document describing the conception of the house shows a landscape drawn figuratively and realistically. The base documentation used for its realisation might have been similar to the one used in other projects such as the Yacht Club (1964-1965) [11] where the landscape was represented using the photos of military flights as reference. The first planimetries: "put down on paper the necessary details for the mental construction of the project, in the need to imagine the building before touching the ground" [Mura 2020]. These sketches reveal a closeness to the artistic world that begins in the early stages of the architect's life. From a young age, Ponis stabilised contact with renowned designers, sculptors and painters such as Lanza, Sironi, Depero and Arturo Martini, who produced their designs at M.I.T.A., the textile factory founded by his father Mario Alberto Ponis [Fochessati, Franzone 2016]. This artistic side of Ponis continued throughout his life, being more evident in some stages where he distanced himself from the architecture world. Ponis was interested, like Pikionis, in the work of Cézanne, as well as other artists such as Constant Permeke and Gino Rossi. His artistic career culminated in the exhibition of his paintings in renowned art galleries of Genoa and Florence [Ponis 2003, pp. 12, 13]. In the planimetry of Casa Hartley, he uses a mixed technique of ink and graphite more typical of artists than architects, to detail the nearby granite silhouettes and their shadows, creating a sense of three-dimensionality. The gradations of colour help us to understand the heights of the rock, which are normally identified by contour lines. Denser patches, outlined by a line of ink, define the mass of trees. Both vegetation and rock, whose contours are accentuated by pink tones referencing to the local granite, define the landscape void where the house emerges.

On this precise representation of the landscape we find handwritten annotations which refer to the most characteristic elements of the place which, at the same, will condition physically the project. These are mixed with others, drawn in a similar way, describing the interior and exterior spaces of the dwelling. In addition, the arrows and dots, drawn in different colours, indicate the most peculiar sides of the enclave and the building, as well as the visual relationships that the house establishes with its surroundings.



Fig. 11. Casa Hartley merged with the landscape of Costa Paradiso [Brandolini 2014, p. 132].

Centred in the plan we can find the silhouette of the Casa Hartley, wedged between the rocks. Its position is not accidental, as Ponis: “made a scientific study of the morphology of the land on which the house was to settle down” [Brandolini 2014, p.125]. Its profile is outlined on a structure of concentric arcs that regulate the fan-shaped composition. This configuration stands out from the generative elevation used by Ponis in other projects a few metres away, such as the Ivan House (1994). The sketches of the latter show how its organic profile, common to Ponis houses, designed in the void of the landscape by means of triangulations (fig. 9).

The decisive geometry of the arches that generate the plan of Casa Hartley contrasts with the organicity of the silhouettes of the site [Vogt 2023]. These design base extends from the interior to the exterior defining the ground-level platforms that continue the slope of the land. Furthermore, the guiding curves are used to mark the position of the structural walls, constructed in concrete blocks, that organize the inner spaces while supporting the weight of the gabled roof [Ponis 1971]. The curvilinear and discontinuous layout organises the activities inside the house, while at the same time allows visual connections to be made between them (fig.10).

Casa Hartley constantly searches shelter using the shape of the rock as a protection from adverse weather. This intention might be subtly references in the similarity of the representation between the building and nature (fig. 11). Its sloping roof seems to visually complete the missing volume of the granite monolith where it apparently rests. At the same time, its inclined roof is followed by the ‘interior landscape’, a succession of terraces that descends with the terrain, allowing the continuation of the project from construction to nature [Brandolini 2006, p.11]. Following the radical layout of curves, the house separates from the rock by a circular courtyard that finds its analogue at the other end, where the main entrance is located. Unfortunately, the necessity of protection from the aggressiveness of the climate of the island forces a disposition of the houses that impedes the establishment of direct visual relationship with the sea that we find in other houses, such as the Casa Scalesiani (1977), located in the same resort at a lower level. In the Casa Hartley, the link with the sea horizon made either through lateral voids in the house or through the belvedere that emerges from the rock-covered courtyard and crosses the landscape, dodging the large emerging monoliths.

Conclusions

Along the professional career of both architects we can notice a constant need to solve the issue of the integration of architecture in the complex landscapes. Pikionis, as well as Ponis, shows a deep interest in understanding the place and its culture. In order to understand and enhance the local image, they travel to different locations of Sardinia and Greece respectively, drawing their vernacular architecture, vegetation and traditional symbols. By sketching they analyse and domesticate the site, it's their particular way of dealing with the complexity of the abrupt topographies in which their interventions are inserted. It is an attitude that is probably encouraged by the artistic facet and the pictorial training of the two architects. For both of them, the active and constant recognition of the features of the enclave is fundamental, walking through it and capturing it in detail in order to ‘own’ it and decipher its possible relationships with the architecture. An atypical, meticulous and artisanal method, which Pikionis himself describes as the only one capable of offering: “a practical knowledge, a feeling for matter and its fashioning, things that no theory is able to teach us” [Condaratos 1990, p.56]. The fidelity and detail of his representation of the context testify to a constant analysis and work *in situ*, in line with the scarcity of cartographic resources available at the middle and end of the last century. This is probably why we find similar representations in the contemporary works of other architects, such as Raili and Reima Pietilä or Álvaro Siza, in which we can see a similar eagerness to understand and capture the landscape in order to link their projects to their surroundings [12].

In the architectural plans studied in the Pikionis and Ponis projects, the architectural form itself is no longer the primary focus, but rather becomes integrated into the surrounding landscape, and in some instances, even disappears entirely, thereby visually representing the significant influence of the natural environment. The aspiration to comprehend the context of the new project is encapsulated in compositions that, beyond their intrinsic aesthetic value, serve as invaluable working material for their creators. It is therefore important that the figurative character of these representations does not distract from their primary function, which is purely functional and subordinate to the correct development of the project. The architectural projects of the Xenia Hotel and Casa Hartley illustrate the significant influence of the design process on the construction process. Both architects employ geometric compositional systems to determine the location

of their projects, with superimposed lines indicating a continuous integration of the construction elements, taking into account the complexity and visual potential of the site. This approach reflects their intention to adapt the architectural design to the specific characteristics of the site, including its topography and the elements that shape its landscape.

The result of this meticulous work process is the creation of interventions that engage with both interior and exterior spaces in a continuous dialogue with the surrounding environment. The routes that are articulated in these interventions are based on sequences of perspectives and volumetric

views that synthesise the entire network of relationships that have been meditated upon. Both projects exemplify the value of the cultural landscape through an architectural approach that is closely connected with all its benefits and challenges. In contrast to the anonymous and repetitive constructions that characterise tourism-related complexes, which often appear disconnected from their surroundings, the projects for the Xenia Hotel and the Casa Hartley represent a model of good practice. This is evidenced by the fact that both architects have opted for the enhancement of the landscape identity from the initial phases of approaching the site.

Notes

[1] Dimitris Pikionis Archive (1887-1968). Benaki Museum is available at: <https://www.benaki.org/index.php?option=com_collections&view=creator&id=126&collectionId=57&lang=en> (accessed 5 July 2024).

[2] "I showed him some of my works, which he praised (...) chronologically, I was his first pupil. It was Yannopoulos [Pericles] and Parthenis who persuaded my father to let me study painting" [Pikionis 1987, p. 27].

[3] Unprecedented growth in quantitative terms [Ferlenga 1999, p. 112].

[4] In the words of architect Zissis Kotionis, this is particularly visible in the floors of the Garaganis House (1939) and the Rigas School (1939), both in Zagora [Tsiambaos 2018, p. 144].

[5] Ferlenga refers with this comparison and a 'great Byzantine fresco' to Pikionis' plan drawings for the Acropolis intervention. This reference can also be used in the case of the plan drawings for the Xenia Hotel [Ferlenga 2023, p. 77].

[6] This is the publication of his doctoral thesis, originally entitled *Raumordnung im griechischen Städtebau*, written at the Technical School of Charlottenburg (Berlin). This version was translated into English in 1972 [Doxiadis 1972, p. 2].

[7] Initially, the hotel had a capacity for 88 beds distributed on a single floor.

In 1961 an additional floor was added, Alberto. [Ferlenga 1999, p. 112].

[8] Alberto Ponis barely knew Sardinia before relocating to the island [Ponis 2003, p. 15].

[9] Alberto Ponis studied architecture in the University of Florence. Once concluded, he made the decision to emigrate to London where he collaborated with the firm of Ernő Goldfinger and Denys Lasdun [Darley 2023].

[10] The resort was promoted by Pierino Tizzoni, who, in the late 60's, bought great extensions of land in the coast of a location previously known by locals as Sarra Niedda (*Selva Negra*). [Piccardo 2023, p. 124].

[11] The Yacht Club is one of Ponis's first projects in Sardinia. The commission consisted in the transformation of an old Napoleonic bunker in modest nautical facilities which Ponis himself completed with a pathway that goes across Punta Stropello connecting the military construction with a nearby inlet, Cala Inglese. The analyse sketches show the *genius loci* of the site. [Brandolini 2014, pp. 92-105].

[12] Specifically, the building of Dipoli in the Otaniemi Campus (Espoo) designed by Raili y Reima Pietilä and Das Marés swimming pools (Matosinhos, Porto) projected by Álvaro Siza [Connah, Pietilä 1989, p. 254], [CCA, ARCH281835 and ARCH282004].

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