In 1929 the great demand for new apartments by the bourgeois class led to the development of a new building type: the “polykatoikia” (polykatoikia = many residences), the Athenian version of urban housing which does not exceed the six floors and is built on small plots by private sector contractors. The most significant examples in interwar Athens were the Polykatoikia at Zaimi and Stourari Streets by Thucydides Valentis and Polvios Michailidis (fig. 2) and the nearby Blue Polykatoikia by Kyriakos Panayotakos.

1950s - 1960s

The group of modern pioneers of the ‘50s vanished after 14 ferocious years that encompassed the 1936’s dictatorship, the Second World War and the Civil War. After the war, large numbers of the rural population migrated to the urban centers. Athens’ population rose to over 1,400,000 people in 1961. This period was the most important one for the development of modern Athens.

On one hand, the main aspect of the city’s development was the invention of the “antiparochi” system. This system gave contractors the right to develop small Athenian plots, exchanging land for built space in upcoming “polykatoikias”. “Antiparochi” gave birth to a populist modernist architecture that very soon covered every single piece of ground that was fit for building on. The dominant “polykatoikia” was an evolution of the ‘30s typology that managed to adapt itself to the demands of different social groups, the site peculiarities and the evolution of building regulations.

On the other hand, this was a very productive period, an “architectural spring”, for a new generation of architects that participated in the modernization of urban infrastructure and the construction of prestigious buildings. Most of the city’s emblematic buildings, as the Athens Hilton Hotel by Emmanuel Vourekas, Prokopios Vassilaidis, Spyros Staikos and Antonis Georgiadis (fig. 3) or the American Embassy by Walter Gropius – TAC, were constructed then. Prestigious buildings of that period often brought together the international style with elements of the classical tradition. At the same time the brutalist ethos dominated the city’s official architecture and was expressed in a series of outstanding public buildings.

buildings as the Passenger Terminal at Piraeus by Yannis Liapis and Elias Skroumbelos (fig. 4) or the Indoor Swimming Pool by Dimitris Fatouros. Prokopis Vassiliadis, Emmanouil Vourekas and Periklis Sakellarios also designed two Organized Beaches and Seaside Resorts in Glyfada and Vouliagmeni, 18 km southeast of Athens (fig. 5). The colonization of Attica’s seashores introduced a new hedonistic and mass oriented approach to the landscape without any reference to the Greek vernacular. Both the “high” and “low” interpretations of the modern idiom were accepted not only by the cultural elite but also by the migrants from the countryside. The enthusiasm of Athens’ inhabitants facing the introduction of modernism in Athens has been recorded by the mass oriented Greek movies of the ’60s. In the films of the period, the modernist subject – usually a bourgeois girl – enjoys the comforts of modern life in the city (sports cars, night clubs, modern villas in the suburbs, seaside resorts). The middle class inhabits the new urban environment of the “polykatoikias” with enthusiasm and is filled with awe at the sight of the neon lights in the center of Athens.

In this short-lived spring of the Athenian modernism we may discern two key figures: Nicos Valsamakis and Takis Ch. Zenetos: Nicos Valsamakis is the best representative of the progression and optimism that characterized the short-lived spring of Athenian modernism. He is a charismatic architect who has been in the foreground of Greek architecture for fifty years now. Contrary to Zenetos, Valsamakis has never presented any theoretical discourse to support his architecture. Nevertheless, his work has been strongly influential for most young architects, especially during the last ten years. Valsamakis’ minimalist sensibility has created the most delicate examples of domestic architecture in Athens. The Single-family House in Philothei (fig. 6) has appropriated Mies van der Rohe’s syntax in order to create the archetypal modernist villa in the Athenian suburbs. His early polykatoikias in the ’50s and ’60s still remain exemplary prototypes of urban housing in the Greek city. Takis Ch. Zenetos was a visionary architect and a very talented designer. He supported the industrialization of construction and the necessity for research in the architectural profession. The High School in Aghios Dimitrios and the Polykatoikia at Amalias Avenue (in collaboration with Margaritis Apostolidis, fig. 7) derived from his innovative design strategies and the requirement for technological refinement. Zenetos’ genuine modernist ethos had no successors in Greece. As he wrote in 1961, “architects are under pressure to work unscientifically”. Unfortunately his buildings were too fragile to survive in Greek cities and most of them have been demolished or modified. The Fix Brewery Plant (fig. 8),
Dimitris Pikionis’ masterwork is the Holiday House at Anavyssos, Attica. 1961-62. (fig. 10) The project consisted of laying out a network of footpaths providing access to a very sensitive archaeological area. Pikionis’ phenomenological approach to architecture originated from his worship of the Attic landscape, which was explained in his 1935 essay entitled “A Sentimental Topography.” As Kenneth Frampton has noted, Pikionis’ importance “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.”

Aris Konstantinidis was strongly influenced by Yannopoulos’ essays, as was Pikionis. Konstantinidis was a very talented photographer. He used photography as a tool for documentation of the Greek landscape and vernacular architecture. His “elements of self-knowledge”, as he called the subjects of his photographs, supported by his militant essays, formulated the basis for the construction of an ideal Hellenic world. Talking about two villages in Mykonos, Konstantinidis noted: “And those small houses are so connected with the landscape — they are so plain and modest and unpretentious, built with a superabundant sensitivity and charm. Certainly, because they were born out of a real necessity (and not as sentimental or personal whim), a necessity that in every construction gives form to the functions of life, so that each building is a vessel of life, which shapes spaces that form extensions not only of the body but also of the soul.”

The locus used to be the primary source of inspiration for Greek architecture throughout the 20th century. The nostalgic interpretations of the vernacular formed a tradition that included ambiguous and mythical elements and has delayed the elaboration of ideology. This world of certainties has been shaken by the violent transformation of the landscape into a suburban area. It is commonly accepted that architectural innovation in Greece should result from an understanding of the new urban landscape. The development of new housing districts has ceased to be a priority in Athens, as in most European cities. The main concern of the local authorities has shifted to the issues of urban quality and the conditions for life in the city. Unfortunately the State does not support local architects and the development of public architecture in the Greek cities has declined since the 1967-1974 dictatorship.

The lack of opportunities offered to the Greek architects was manifested during the construction of the recent Olympic works. Greek architects were not involved directly in the Olympic projects since the powerful building contractors controlled the commissions. It was no surprise that the Organizing Committee chose Santiago Calatrava, an international star, to raise the visual profile of the event and provide character to the main Olympic complex. The implementation of the Olympic games program in Athens offered an opportunity to open up the borders to internationally renowned architects. The transformation of Greece’s capital to a contemporary metropolis demanded prestigious architectural projects by international architectural offices, such as Architecture Studio, Mario Botta, Hopkins Architects, Bernard Tschumi and Kisho Kurokawa. (fig. 12) Most Greek architects, and especially the younger ones, are involved only in small-scale private projects. The architects that are presented in the following pages have appropriated the particularities of the Greek city in their architectural work. What these projects share is a preference for architectural purity and clarity of form and a Mediterranean sensibility in the perception of natural phenomena, such as the Athenian light. Neobrutalists concern coexist with contemporary expressions of urban purism, in order to investigate an architectural expression of resistance against the beloved chaos of the Athenian urban landscape.

1990s – 2000s

Since 1991 Athens’ population has stabilized at around 3,500,000. The population has not been homogenous since the 1990s influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia. The younger generation of the city’s residents has grown up in the urban landscape of the Athenian “polykatoikias” without memories of the countryside. Nowadays, Athens develops a new metropolitan culture taking advantage not only of its own 20th century urban tradition but also of the embodiment of the new ethnic groups. During the 20th century Greek architecture has vacillated between two poles of influence: a local one, which explored the qualities of the Greek landscape, and an international one, which assimilated the development of architectural trends and especially modernism. Today the distance between these two poles has diminished for two main reasons: first, the new information technology and contemporary society’s mobility have pulled down the borders of the past; second, architectural interest has shifted from the natural to the urban landscape.

Aristomenis Provelengios and Dimitris Pikionis relation between Attica’s urban and natural landscape. A Landscape of the Athens National Tourism Organization and supervised the construction of significant works that Greece needed in order to enter the world tourist industry. It was in the above context that Pikionis and Konstantinidis created their most outstanding projects. Dimitris Pikionis’ masterwork is the Landscaping of the Athens Acropolis and Philopappou Hill (fig. 9). The project consisted of laying out a network of footpaths providing access to a very sensitive archaeological area. Pikionis’ phenomenological approach to architecture originated from his worship of the Attic landscape, which was explained in his 1935 essay entitled “A Sentimental Topography.” As Kenneth Frampton has noted, Pikionis’ importance “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.”

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1970s – 1980s

In 1971 Athens’ population reached 2,800,000. The short-lived spring was followed by a period of political turbulence and seven years of dictatorship. Since 1967 the State has shown a lack of interest in prestige architecture. At the same time, population growth in Athens manifested the insufficiency of the urban infrastructure and raised serious environmental concerns. The need to house migrants to the urban centers was met exclusively by the improvisations of small building enterprises. This unorthodox urbanization process that was based on the infinite reproduction of the “polykatoikias” devastated the Attic landscape. The optimism of the 60s was replaced by a nostalgia for what the migrants from the countryside had left behind. The modernist era was over and Athens became a depressed city in the 70s and 80s. Pikionis’ critique of modernism and Konstantinidis’ ontological approach of the vernacular exerted a remarkable influence on Greek architecture, which led to the dominance of critical regionalism in the forthcoming years. The most significant work of the period belongs to Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis. Their architecture, which has been internationally acclaimed, is based on patterns derived from both Pikionis and Konstantinidis and is supported by a discourse which maintains a strong critical attitude. (fig. 11)