

C H A M B R E T E C H N I Q U E D E G R È C E
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES

COLLOQUE DE THESSALONIQUE 3-10 OCTOBRE 1973

Prof. **GEORGE P. LAVAS**
GRÈCE

PAST SETTLEMENTS AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE:
STRUCTURAL CORRELATION AND INTERACTION

COMITE NATIONAL HELLENIQUE DE L'ICOMOS
RUE KARAGEORGI SERVIAS 4 • TELEPHONE 32.22.466 • 32.36.652 • ATHENES 125 • GRECE

PAST SETTLEMENTS AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE : STRUCTURAL CORRELATION AND INTERACTION

By Professor George P. Lavas

The subject of reviving past settlements is, of course, a complex and difficult effort to be undertaken by several specialized professional domains simultaneously; general substructure of region, economic considerations on employment and production, cultural data and a host of further fixed factors of social organization are basic points and prerequisites for the solution of any relevant problems. This communication is not touching upon the above fundamental matters but rather refers to the domain of architectural search which forms a follow-up to the course of this process and, specifically, to the relationship between construction elements established in the past and new ones which would, inevitably, coexist in the context of revived dwelling units.

Folk and "modern" architecture

A basic characteristic, appearing during the Renaissance of Architecture in the early 20th century, is the new relationship between designers and architectural creation of the past; this relationship consists of establishing a new set of priorities aimed at studying and comprehending the so-called "folk" or "anonymous" architecture as opposed to the 19th century view in which the styles of various historical periods of formal architecture were the centre of attraction, inspiration and emulation for concerned architects of the time. The exponents of new, "modern" architecture reject this attitude and find inspiration not in temples, palaces or other isolated monuments of varying historical style but, rather, in architectural and urban designs of popular origin, seeking, within them, to reconstruct past life-styles and study dwelling experiences relevant to established and tested social structures. This kind of search is increasingly becoming more pronounced and specific, both in the curricula of the Schools of Architecture and in the work of the most important designers of our time. Thus, we can now talk of a new consciousness about the part played by historical studies—in this context—in the education and professional work of architects, to such an extent

that some chairs of the History of Architecture are renamed and new research programs are initiated at European universities concerning this particular material of folk creation in settlements.¹

This reversion of historical perspective, away from "formal" and "grand" architecture towards structure of a broader social framework, is an occurrence not irrelevant to the subject and intentions of this Conference and it is, perhaps, worth looking briefly at its basic tenets and exponents. Its origins can be traced to the 19th century as, essentially, no more than a form of reaction to the "intellectual" architecture of dwellings as conceived during the Renaissance and continued through the centuries that followed, by stressing the monumental aspect rather than the functional, practical and emotional relationship of man to his dwelling space and environment. Out of the precursors of this new spirit, I would like to refer to some of those who, even at the pinnacle of the intense "historism", were responsible for the first foundations of reversion to a study of the primary and fundamental forms of dwelling. Among them, one must mention Philip Webb, the innovator of dwelling in England (1831-1915), who turned to the forms of the Tudor and Stuart eras, smoothing, thus, the ground for a new way of looking at the subject. It is, indeed, mainly from England that this new spirit springs and is carried on to a continental Europe, starting from Germany. It is H. Mathesius (1861-1927), who, in his book entitled "Das Englische Haus" (1904), became an enthusiastic advocate of the English "Domestic Revival" and influenced broader circles to a large extent, especially after the foundation of the "Deutscher Werkbund" which became a means of propagating new ideas.

Similar trends appear in the United States at about the same time; it is F.L. Wright himself who contemplates the creations of folk architecture nostalgically and considers them a "fresh spring" for inspiration since they are in an immediate and esoteric communication with man and his basic demands: "That is why

folk buildings growing in response to actual needs, fitted into environment by people who knew better than to fit them to it with native feeling - buildings that grew as folk-love and folk-song grew, are today for us better worth study than all the highly self-conscious academic attempts at the beautiful throughout all Europe " 2.

F.L. Wright's ideas became known to Europe at about 1910 and, in turn, influenced the Amsterdam School while another face of American popular dwelling, the "balloon-frame house"-where simplicity is up to par with the quality of construction- became quite early, an object of study by pioneering designers. The same category of study and inspiration for similar anonymous structures would include works by Konrad Wachsmann, Henry van der Velde and Hans Poelsig which are equally the preliminary phases of the preconstruction technique in the construction trade.

Contacts between Western architects and the Far East led to the latter region's traditional architecture becoming an object of attention and admiration by the former. F.L. Wright, Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius - to name but a few- became advocates of the merits of the Japanese house. Gropius' statement speaks for itself in this respect: "The traditional house is so strikingly modern because it contains perfect solutions, already centuries old, for problems which the contemporary western architect is still wrestling with today..."⁴.

India, Africa and, especially the Mediterranean basin are inexhaustible resources and poles of attraction for modern architecture and art in a broader sense. The enumeration of names and objects with respect to this field of research would be far too prohibitive in length; suffice it to mention the discovery of African art in the early 20th century and the names of Kirchner, Vlaminck, Matisse, Picasso, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, who found inspiration for their own work in the above regions.

These first indications of a switch to anonymous creation, has taken on the dimensions of a wider trend with multiple implications, with the passage of time and, especially, since World War Two. Architects concerned with solving modern housing problems

turn to past settlements, not just as a matter of historical interest, but also as a means of drawing data and being taught in a way that might conceivably help them in their own search for solutions. Numerous contributions to specialized journals, books and reports on the subject of "architecture without architects" - the title of the probably best-known publication on the subject of folk architecture - plus, mainly, direct influence on the architectural output of the past two decades, show the degree of the impact past settlements have had on the theory and practice espoused by modern designers. Certainly, the influence of anonymous architecture on the modern architectural constructions, as witnessed in the work of Le Corbusier, Alvaró, Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph or in housing developments like Hales in Berne, Habitat in Montreal or Thamesmead in London, is not always, beyond criticism (often justifiable); it shows, nonetheless, recognition of the virtues of the past settlements.

O n t o l o g i c a l c o n s i d e r a t i o n o f s e t t l e m e n t s

If the switch to fundamental forms and to the archetypes of human settlement is the first characteristic of the historical consideration of architecture in our times, the second one is surely the manner in which modern designers concentrate in order to study those housing modes; even in this aspect, the contrast is obvious with the methods of study prevailing in the 19th century which, in its wish to emulate forms and styles, sought intensely to emphasize accuracy in details and a faithful representation and reconstruction of the past monuments, giving rise, thus, to systematic morphological considerations.

This tendency still survives, of course, but it is now mostly a domain dealt with by the authorities responsible for Rehabilitation and Conservation of Monuments rather than a practised technique of modern architectural endeavour. On the other hand, what

has emerged clearly both in written (papers, reports, etc.) and in applied work influenced by folk architecture, is the fact that these structures are of concern not so much because of their morphological aspects - even though the latter form an object of attention as well - as they are with respect to the internal structure served by this genre of architecture. Through the historical search undertaken by designers - and on the basis of the few written works cited before - it is obvious that they wish to reconstruct not the buildings themselves but, rather, their relationship and place within the comprehensive framework and life style that have given rise to them. The particular architectural product is of little concern as is the local or ethnic style by itself; the aim is the general structure of the settlement as a system, as an entity encompassing, an experience and a message. Thus, detailed comparative morphology of architectural forms yields before other characteristics such as formation, structural articulation and interconnection of the particular construction objects and spaces along with a reference thereof to the total settlement. Plasticity, variety and originality of particular architectural products will, of course, always exert fascination upon sensitive receivers, but never rush them to one-faceted and piece-meal observations. The virtues evident in the three-dimensional balance of the whole, in the self-sufficiency and in the internal relationship of the built to the unbuilt environment, are elements of greater value than the reconstruction of a fascinating portico or the windows of particular buildings. It is of interest to note, at this point, that several terms, new or borrowed from other domains of established knowledge, are used currently in the study of past settlements, e.g. "group design" "process-planning", etc., in order to express more closely the manner of looking at such settlements. This method deals less with external form, construction detail and aesthetic-visual expression and more with "dissecting" and analysing the whole settlement as a dynamic entity without static properties but rather

exhibiting continuous transformation.

Based on visible world phenomena and on visual surface relations, modern architectural trends seek, thus, to penetrate into the substance of material objects and of their interrelationships. This thesis is but a part of the general search of our times as witnessed in the various fields of science, in philosophy and other manifestations of life seeking a deeper than hitherto understanding of the image of the world; this image is no longer finite and specified but becomes uncertain as it was in the course of the Renaissance.

The merits of folk architecture

The fact that past settlements have become the focus of consideration, not just by the historians of architecture but by people concerned with modern constructional practice as well, has certainly its roots at the interest provided by spaces and their arrangement, quite apart from reaction to the 19th century "Historicism"; this interest has overwhelmed a wide variety of individuals ranging from those yearning for a romantic past, the inhabitants of cities harassed by air pollution and inhuman or dull constructed bulks and the archaeologists to scholar-architects. Everyone is attracted to the merits of these settlements and either their historical importance, cultural continuity, morphological variety, human scale or their functional virtues are considered as more or less significant characteristics. What stresses the interest shown by modern architecture towards these settlements, is their ability to present a flexible and versatile structure which can satisfy the needs of their residents as time goes on, in such a way as to become able to admit new functions and uses in a framework established long before these uses became apparent or even suspected. Their adaptability to the future as a whole system, rather than rigidity and static character, is perhaps their most substantial virtue since it allows them to admit in their body and assimilate most inventions

and conveniences of everyday life in our times, such as the motor car, central heating, hot-and-cold water facilities, refrigerators, etc., in a way that makes them competitive -even without much difficulty- with the dwellings built nowadays on the basis of precisely these new impediments of living. It is worth pondering on the space available in modern dwellings and imagining that the next two generations invent as many conveniences and demands as have emerged in the two previous generations: would spaces, constructed now, be able to display the same perspective for life as the one is evidence in past structures as a model? Even the broadest needs of our times can⁸ be satisfied by past architecture since not only can it admit functions unsuspected at the time it flourished (an old university building can be converted to a computer centre through alterations) but, also, nearly double its capacity within its fixed volume, as demonstrated in the building of the University of Technology in Zürich (G. Sauer, architect), after its recent interior alterations.

This comprehensive virtue of past architecture is possible because the prime consideration in its conception and development was spaciousness among the interior systems which compose its entities. The house, the garden, the road intrinsically possess the capability of allowing changes and extensions, providing, for instance, room to leave the car at the roadside, the heating fuel reservoir in the garden, the washing machine in the vestibule, the bicycle by the door, etc.⁹ Thus, spaciousness, lacking in modern architectural products, emerges not as luxury but, rather, as a basic factor in the survival of such settlements through time.

Revival of settlements and formulation of its methods

The relatively extensive analysis of the relationship between past and modern housing forms aimed at pointing out a fundamental factor of the problem of reviving the former, namely: the fact that these settlements, through revival, will be-

come a f u t u r e reality, not a thing of the past any longer. Relating modern architectural thought to the existing material - an intense and ontological process as already seen- and focusing the concern of modern designers to its merits, such as comprehensiveness of its general structure, organisation of functions and adaptability to time and n e w needs and uses, are advantageous and suitable factors in planning the right strategy with the end of undertaking a crusade for reviving these settlements.

Modern architecture's concern with past settlements means that the appropriate framework already exists -i.e. the knowledge about their structure- in order to allow a methodological organisation in handling problem - solving on a correct scale and through the appropriate agents. The preceding analysis leads to the conclusion that the problem of r e v i v a l is not identical to conservation or rehabilitation of monuments. The target here is much broader and more demanding and concerns the future, not the past, in seeking the creation of a n e w l i f e - s t y l e within an old, established framework. Lack of ambiguity is the word both for what is available and what is s e u g h t the latter and action comprising, of course, the necessity of sticking to the outline, to the primary structure and architectural qualities (volumetric, aesthetic, rational and kindred matters) of the past settlement without excluding, in the process, the right of transposition of change on and addition to such elements as may serve the n e w inhabitants and their n e w demands and needs.

On the basis of the above general principle, the method of work can, thus, be decided after having been presented here in a most general outline, leaving the door open for possibilities of adaptation to the particular data of each specific case : the settlement as a whole, in its present form of a system of constructed and open spaces and re -

produced accurately as a unit, will form the basis of all further action. Particular buildings or conserved monuments, distinguished for their architectural quality, will be the focus and fixed landmarks in the new planning, regardless of their previous functions which may now be changed.¹⁰

The fixed points, spread out through the whole settlement, would, thus, become architectural elements of primary importance and rightful place, but not "museum" pieces; they would rather be guides and criteria for new morphological-composition, constructional reconstitution and supplementation, always in venture of a new body.

In this way, it might be possible to achieve a marriage of the past with the present, not just as a morphological bringing together but, also, as a synthesis of past and present experiences which would satisfy cultural, social and economic needs of the new community. Such a transubstantiation of the settlement through priority-setting and thoughtful sharing of uses immediately related to the character and arrangement of already existing spaces, would be but the correct and pragmatic evaluation of a problem which is becoming increasingly acute.

If we realize the fact that the proportion of these settlements to the continually increasing constructional output in our days is becoming smaller at an ever accelerating rate, planning a realistic policy for incorporating these entities into a new architectural and urban-design unit, as outlined above, is probably the sole remaining chance of salvaging the essential part of their structure. Past settlements are today faced with two types of danger: one springing from those specialists who, being fanatical as much as sincere, clamour nostalgically for reconstruction of the past by looking always back, forgetful of the fact that life is marching ahead, and the second from those

who, submerged in today's burning housing problems, envisage future forms without taking its account past experience as both a necessary and inevitable dimension of the future. The former groups demand resurrection of the dead with their intense historicism while the latter, with their agnosticism of History on one hand and the power they possess through their responsibility on programs of housing and tourist development of whole regions on the other, may prove destruction agents of the past structures in the, often sincere, belief that they actually "develop" them. In-between, is the group already mentioned, i.e. the exponents of modern Architecture - led by its most distinguished workers- who have turned to a study of folk Architecture in the past few decades, considering it a fertile source of inspiration in creating the style of our times. The effort by some of them, not only to bring to the fore the virtues of this kind of Architecture but introduce them to modern housing projects as well, is a hopeful sign for the future of past settlements even though it remains a debatable experiment so far as their contemporaries are concerned. It is hopeful in the sense that there exists, already, the relevant preparation in the context of the study of structure, possibilities and limitations of past settlements by people who participate in the two-fold architectural search in the old and the new. These forces, organised in integrated local agencies could undertake the difficult, indeed, task of formulating the methods of this architectural problem which, by its nature, is both complex and full of significance for the cultural level of our times. Past settlements become increasingly fewer with each passing day. Their salvage for "museum" purposes is objectively neither a correct nor a fit course. The only way in which we can preserve continuity with the architectural roots of our civilization

not for the sake of the past but as a matter of concern for our times and our descendants- is to integrate this small proportion of past architecture into the broader housing framework and the pace of our times, in a balanced, realistic and respectful way. The study on its revival by the suitable agents should form part of the broader developmental programming, with a perspective for future growth and life since it will itself be an organic component of future settlements and, simultaneously, a carrier of valuable historical experience.

As a supplement to the above considerations, please allow me to mention an example of such a process of revival, one of several going on in the whole world. I am referring to the village of Bruson in Wallis, Switzerland, a mountain community of 250 inhabitants, which has been selected as a typical example of many mountain communities in that country. The project was carried out under the supervision of experienced architects assisted by graduating students and was presented at the National Swiss Exhibition (EXPO 1964) which is held every twenty-five years; the relevant publication has appeared in the "Werk" journal (II, 1965, pp. 399-410)

G. LAVAS

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. notice ("ZEIT" newspaper, 3-3-72, Nr. 9, p. 51) for filling the Chair of History, Theory and Critique of Architecture at the Staatliche Hochschule Für Bildende Kunst Berlin, where anonymous architecture and past settlements are referred to as an autonomous curriculum. There is also a separate department (Arbeitsstelle Für Anonyme Architektur) at the Institut Für Kreativität at the TH/Karlsruhe.
2. F.L. Wright, *Ausgeführte Bauten Und Entwürfe*, Introduction of F.L. Wright on Architecture, New York, p. 63.
3. Cf. S. Giedion, *Raum, Zeit, Architektur*, 1964, p. 236
4. Cf. W. Gropius, K. Tange, H. Mayer, Y. Ishimoto, *Katsura Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, Yale Univ. Press, 1960, pp. I-II
5. Reference to the well-known book by R. Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects*, Museum Of Modern Art, New York, 1964. As to the intentions of architects, see, also, P. Oliver, Editor, *Shelter And Society*, London, 1969, p. 25
6. Cf. G. Lavas, *Anonymous and Modern Architecture (in greek)*, "Architecture In Greece", -/1972, pp. 49-59
7. Among others one should note the paper by H. Hoepfer and G. Nitschke, *Prozess Planung*, "Baumeister", 8/1967, pp. 1016-21
8. Cf. W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. V, 1924.
9. A significant analysis and interesting views can be found in the brief work by L. Burckhardt und W. Forderer, *Bau und Prozess*, Teufen, 1972, 2nd Ed., especially on p. 31
10. Interesting ideas on the subject at hand are to be found in the contributions to the "WERK" journal (12, 1972), under the general title: *Restaurieren Und Bauen Im Historischen Kontext*.