

Parallel realities of modernism : from Stuttgart to Larissa

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«What we are witnessing here is radically different from the playboy fantasy of 1927: It is the moment of achievement for the petit-bourgeois dream of modernity which dominated post-war Greece.»

PARALLEL REALITIES OF
MODERNISM: FROM
STUTTGART TO LARISSA
Nikos Magouliotis



A
A promotional picture taken in Weissenhof, Stuttgart (1927)



B
An amateur family photograph taken in Yannouli, Larissa (1981)

The relation of authored modernist artworks to anonymous products of mass culture has always been hard to pinpoint and often even difficult to admit. Architects love to scorn the occasional clumsiness of non-architects' amateur efforts for modern constructions and try to exclude them from their definition of «architecture». Several architecture schools still echo such views, by instructing us, implicitly or explicitly, that a bicycle shed, a super-market, a parking lot or even our own boring apartment are merely «buildings», while the term «architecture» is reserved for cathedrals, villas, monuments, and mainly exceptional eponymous works of design⁽¹⁾, which are elevated beyond our banal reality.

Of course, one has to acknowledge that the situation has progressed significantly and architects have managed to expand the definition of «architecture» in order to incorporate more anonymous, vernacular buildings. But, at this point, a paradox emerges: As long as anonymous buildings remain «primitive» or «traditional» enough and radically different to what architects design, they are included in our definition of architecture (and qualify as sources of inspiration). But, as soon as these buildings start looking like (or lending some of the pretense of) eponymous buildings, they are condemned and excluded. So, despite the fact that several architects have tried to convince us of the value of the «ugly and ordinary»⁽²⁾, or even argue that «everything is architecture»⁽³⁾, the anonymous majority of modern constructions that makes up our everyday reality often remain outside our scope or our definition of architecture. In other words, through training as architects, we are, to some extent, instructed to refrain from looking at reality or to focus on selected parts of it.

This perhaps describes the architects' side, but does not touch upon the other half of this supposed antinomy, the anonymous majority of modernity, or what is usually referred to as «mass culture». On this topic, Umberto Eco wrote that «members of the working class consume bourgeois cultural models believing them to be the independent expression of their own class.» But he argued that this connection remains partially unacknowledged, because «bourgeois culture [...] identifies mass culture as a «subculture» which does not belong to it, without realizing that this mass culture still shares the same roots as «high» culture.»⁽⁴⁾ The two images to the left^{A,B}, which are the starting point for this text, could perhaps be read as an example of such a relation: They were produced under completely different circumstances, at a distance of about 6 decades and 2.000 kilometres from one another. And yet they are brought together by an elective affinity, as they contain the same basic elements in similar arrangements: A female figure in the first image—or two in the second—, an automobile and a house. What I am trying to explain in the following is how these images could constitute two parallel realities of modernism in different contexts.

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The image on the above is perhaps more easily recognizable: Soon after the completion of the Weissenhof settlement in Stuttgart, a house designed within it by Le Corbusier became the backdrop for an advertisement of the latest automobile model of Mercedes Benz. This promotional photograph has been reproduced numerous times in archi-

tectural contexts, as it appears to complement Le Corbusier's original argument; namely that architecture should catch up with the functional design which car-, plane- and boat-manufacturers had already been applying to their latest products.⁽⁵⁾ A common reaction of architects to this well known image—which can either vindicate or surpass the aforementioned Corbusian argument—is that, as seen today, the form of the car appears rather dated, while the architecture of the house seems still relevant or even «timeless». But, what makes the image «timeless», or at least persistent is not only the isolated element of the house, but also its relation to the other parts of the general composition.

The structure of this image, which has often persisted in such advertisements until today, epitomizes the male consumerist dream of modernism: The background is occupied by a strikingly modern house, photographed from an angle which highlights its dynamic composition. In the foreground stands a modern automobile and a female figure, presumably dressed in the latest fashion of the time. The young woman's profile pose seems rather unspontaneous and highly stylized, almost like a sculptural figure in a frieze. But, by facing in the same direction as the car and holding on to its side, she appears to be suggesting imminent departure. The seriousness of her posture is balanced by the doll she is holding under her arm; a detail that makes her conveniently ambiguous for the spectator: She could be a «femme fatale» or a «dolita». In any case, the car has space only for two; what is missing from the frame is the male observer—the target audience of this consumerist fantasy—who is urged to seize the lady and the car, and to swirl around the excitingly modern house, along the smooth new roads and pristine landscape that surround it.

One can easily tell that the image on the right was produced under radically different circumstances: It is an amateur photograph, intended to capture a specific moment in a family's life and probably meant to end up in their photoalbum. It was taken around 1980 in Yannouli, a rather provincial residential area in the outskirts of the city of Larissa, in the heart of the Greek mainland. The person who took this picture had grown up in the area, in a village a few kilometers away, where he also met his wife. Like many people from that area in the 1960s, the couple emigrated to Australia, where they spent several years working in factories. Having had their twin-daughters in the meantime—the two girls in the picture—, they eventually decided to come back and settle near Larissa, whose developing agricultural and industrial production would provide better job opportunities than their native village. With the money they had made in Australia and with what they accumulated in Larissa over the subsequent years, they decided to build a house and buy a car for themselves and their daughters.

The building in the background of the photo belongs to their neighbors, but is practically identical to the one that they built. It is not visible in this picture, but it stands on the left of what we see in the frame. Although rather inconspicuous at first sight, this house appears to echo a specific modernist recipe: It is a white *boite-sur-pilotis* with a flat roof, freestanding in a spacious lot and surrounded by a relatively tamed natural landscape. In the Greek periphery of the 1980s, being able to construct such a building signified a radical departure from the traditional mud-brick single-story

house, as for instance the type of home in which the couple had been raised. The concrete-laid patio, on which the car and the two girls stand proudly, was a similar move away from this muddy past. But still, although such a construction was a relative sign of modernization, it was usually neither designed by a trained architect nor constructed in a technologically advanced fashion. It was copied and adapted from buildings seen in nearby cities, and then built in the villages and outskirts through the manual labor and empirical know-how of local builders, usually with the help of the owners themselves.

The car in the center of the photograph is a Nissan hatchback model called the *Datsun Cherry*; an affordable family car of its time, so recently bought that it has no license plates yet. In 1970, a Nissan factory had been established in the nearby city of Volos, mainly producing motorized vehicles such as tractors or trucks, which would be sold to meet the needs of the predominantly agricultural production of the wider area. About a decade later, the factory also started producing its first passenger cars, reproducing Nissan models such as the one in the picture. What we see here is an outsourced, locally produced and therefore affordable modern commodity. The twin daughters of the couple are identically dressed and pose proudly next to the newly purchased automobile. Just like their counterpart in Stuttgart in 1927, they are integral parts of an ideal image, but their poses are far less stylized: One appears to be taking the circumstance of the family photograph quite seriously, while the other feels more at ease with their new belongings. What we are witnessing here is radically different from the playboy fantasy of 1927: It is the moment of achievement for the petit-bourgeois dream of modernity which dominated post-war Greece.

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Describing the rise of modernist architecture in South America, occurring under partly similar conditions as in Greece, Mauro F. Guillen emphasized the fact that the intellectual and cultural life of several of these countries—as well as the architecture its intellectuals envisioned—were somewhat ahead of the economic and technological realities that supported them. To summarize this contradiction, he coined the phrase «modernism without modernity»⁽⁶⁾. This of course referred to the limited efforts of an aspiring avant-garde, whose goals went beyond what was affordable and feasible for the larger masses of the population. With regard to the Greek post-war context, the photograph we are looking into here expresses the inverse condition: The aspirations of the working-class for a private modern house that was affordable and achievable, but eventually fell short of the aspirations of the avant-garde which had conceived it. Although a simple paraphrasing or inversion of Guillen's motto would not be enough to encompass the particular conditions of this situation, we will resort to describing what we see in the photograph as «(material) modernization without (cultural) modernity». «Modernism», which we chose to leave out of this equation, is still somewhat present in the second photograph. But its meaning is negotiated by the contradiction of a material and formal novelty within a situation whose social attributes are otherwise rather traditional.

Ethnographer Hermann Bausinger has explained how modernization arrived in such peripheral contexts with a significant phase difference (in comparison to more urban and metropolitan areas) and in a fragmented way⁽⁷⁾. But, as he argued, incoming novelties were often filtered through and fused with traditional social structures, creating complicated hybrids which are worth studying. An example of this is concrete: In Greece, this modern material was rarely used for prefabricated, industrialized production of housing; the local building sector never adopted the *Plattenbau* system and remained tied to the simpler Corbusian logic of the *Dom-ino* frame. But concrete's capacity of being handled with manual and low tech means⁽⁸⁾, allowed its wide dissemination in the periphery and resulted in the production of new forms of architecture, in places where the social structure still pertained to traditional norms.

From a formal aspect, the house in Yannouli is certainly less exciting than its counterpart in Weissenhof, but it still fulfils some basic preconditions of the modernist dictum: One can easily distinguish the pilotis supports under it and the flat roof over it—this makes two out of the five Corbusian points. In the Weissenhof house, such structural and formal features were intended as a revolutionary break with previous traditions of construction and architecture. In the case of Yannouli, they are also a brave move away from the mud-brick and load bearing walls of the local tradition. But they are also utilized to accommodate a rather traditional way of social and spatial production. If we look closely, we can see that its pilotis space is still unplastered and that the cement mixer is resting nearby. Houses like this are a constant work-in-progress for their inhabitants: Despite their potential affinity with Corbusian forms, the house's pilotis space and its flat roof are not intended as final forms; they are bi-products or intermediate stages of a continuous building process, in which they are only left empty to be filled at a later time. In other words, these are the spaces in which the house will expand to accommodate the future growth of the family.

In post-war Greece, the lack of housing provision by the state and the general financial precarity forced people to build for themselves and to accumulate space in order to provide for the younger generations. Put simply, the empty space over and under the house in the background of this photograph would eventually become the dowry for the weddings of the girls posing in its foreground. At the moment when the photograph was taken, their future had been guaranteed, but also geographically and spatially pre-defined by the house which stood behind them. If contrasted with the brave promises of social and architectural renewal of the early 20th century modernist manifestos, this scene starts to look like an ironic misprint. But for its protagonists, it is still an image of the moment when their conception of the «modern» house became a reality.

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I started my analysis based on an elective affinity between two images. It would certainly be impossible to claim that the photograph in Yannouli was intended as a reenactment of the scene in Weissenhof. But it is very likely that the young family had seen and absorbed other aspirational

images like this, through mass media marketing imagery. In other words, this photograph of a very personal family moment is affected by dominant cultural models and consumerist fantasies. The photographer and his family were trying to confirm and depict such a fantasy, precisely at the moment when it became reality. What simultaneously brings together and disconnects the two images we have examined so far, is the dissonance between fantasy and reality. Dominant cultural models, such as the image from Weissenhof or its numerous re-constructions in marketing imagery, are often imposed on social groups and contexts that are radically different to their origin, thus producing seemingly paradoxical outcomes. At this point, seeing the second image as simply a misinterpretation or a parody of the first one, would be an inadequate interpretation. Both images represent two dreams and two realities that are equally valid for the people in front of and behind the camera.



The house in Yannouli (1981)