

A Sentimental Topograhý

Dimitris Pikionis



A Sentimental Topography

Tó 30 Máti (*Third Eye*) magazine, 1935

Dimitris Pikionis

Edition

Käräjäkivet

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© Hélène Binet - Dimitris

Pikionis, Landscaping of the

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Editor's Note

In this issue, Käräjäkivet wants to pay a modest tribute to the Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis by re-publishing his seminal text “A Sentimental Topography”, originally published in 1935 in the magazine “Tó 3o Máti” (Third eye).

It is difficult to talk about a text with such a philosophical approach and even more to write on why it was an old desire to insert it in this little collection. One of the reasons certainly is the poetic way it helps us to understand our place in nature. Nature, men, temple as part of the same and uncountable set of interconnected phenomena as “nothing exists by its own, everything is part of a total harmony”.

It was decided to pair the text with some images and drawings of Pikionis most well-known project, the Landscaping of the Athens Acropolis, as in this particular work, it is clearer than in any other, the Pikionis defining feeling “for the interaction of the being with the glyptic form of the site”.¹

The elaboration of this issue would not have been possible without the generosity and cooperation of Dora and Agni Pikionis (respectively, granddaughter and daughter of Dimitris Pikionis) to whom we want to thank for granting permission to reproduce this text. Special appreciation also to the collaboration of the Benaki Museum-Modern Greek Architecture Archives, in the person of its head Natalia Boura for enabling the access and republishing of original material from Dimitris Pikionis Archive. A final acknowledgement to the prestigious photographer Hélène Binet who kindly authorized the use of her images.

1. Excerpt from *For Dimitris Pikionis*, text from Kenneth Frampton, Dimitris Pikionis, Architect 1887-1968 ‘A Sentimental Topography’, Architectural Association, London, 1987, p.6.

A Sentimental Topography²

Tó 30 Máti (*Third Eye*) magazine, 1935

Dimitris Pikionis,
Architect



2. English version from Dimitris Pikionis, Architect 1887-1968 'A Sentimental Topography', Architectural Association, London.

3. In an attempt to analyse the human act of walking, Rodin remarked admiringly: 'Man is a walking cathedral' (*Les cathedrales de France*).

4. The geometry of a place or land is a product of its composition. By composition I mean the nature of the materials that go into its making, and also the nature of the diverse forces that have worked or are still working upon it. The nature of matter has to do with chemistry, which is ruled, like all things, by number. But the operation of external forces (such as fire, water or earthquakes), though it may appear wanton and uncontrolled to human eyes, is really as strictly calculated by nature as the proliferation of the minutest living creatures in the universe.

As we walk upon this earth, our hearts experience anew that rapturous joy we felt as children when we first discovered our ability to move in space - the alternating disruption and restoration of balance which is walking.³

We rejoice in the progress of our body across the uneven surface of the earth and our spirit is gladdened by the endless interplay of the three dimensions that we encounter at every step, the shifting and changing that occurs with the mere passage of a cloud high up in the sky. We walk past a rock, or a tree trunk, or a shrub's tufted foliage; we move up and down, following the rise and fall of the ground, tracing its convexities, which are the hills and mountains, and its concavities, which are the valleys.

Then we rejoice in the wide, flat expanse of the plains; we measure the earth by the toil of our bodies.

This deserted country lane is far superior to the thoroughfares of the large modern city, for all its twists and curves and infinite changes of perspective show us the divine hypostasis of singularity when submitted to the harmony of the whole.

We meditate upon the spirit which emanates from each particular land or place.⁴

Here the ground is hard, stony, precipitous, and the soil is brittle and dry. There the ground is level; water surges out of mossy patches. Further on, the breeze, the altitude and the configuration of the ground announce the proximity of the sea. Further on still, the vegetation runs riot, in an extreme culmination of the earth's thrust towards form, towards a perfect attunement of its clothing to the rhythm of the seasons.

Natural forces, geometry of the earth and quality of light and air single out this land as a cradle of civilization. Mysterious exhalations seem to rise from the ground. Here are ancient, venerable places of worship - a precipice that fills one's soul with awe, a cave where mysterious spirits, supernatural powers dwell. In face of these

The Philopappou road 1954-1957



Dimitris Pikionis (in white) in Saint Dimitrios Loumbardiariis courtyard, 1954–58

© Dimitris Pikionis A.M.K.E., Athens. Photo: courtesy Agni Pikioni Archive

5. 'Motionless' in a relative sense only, since this geometry is also affected and influenced, through a reflex process, by the motion of the light and air encompassing it.

6. Climate, in other words the mobile geometry of a country's atmosphere, derives from its relative position on this planet. A country's position determines its distance from the sun, which changes with the seasons. Climate is thus affected and influenced by this other geometry. The intensity and quality of light is determined by a country's position in relation to the sun, by the angle of the sun's rays and by the quality of the atmosphere. A sentient, empathic nature often ascribes the quality of atmosphere to light itself.

7. Our sentient nature cannot conceive of 'matter' independently of temperature, or the constitution of the atmosphere independently of the intensity and quality of light. A space is perceived to be smaller when it is hot and larger when it is cold. The weight of matter appears to increase with heat. Shape becomes sharper with cold.

primeval images of the earth, the soul is shot through with a mystical tremor, like the water-finder when his divining-rod comes upon the invisible presence of a subterranean stream.

Light created the world. Light preserves it and makes it fruitful.

Light reveals the world to our corporeal eyes so that the light of our spirits might in turn illuminate the world.

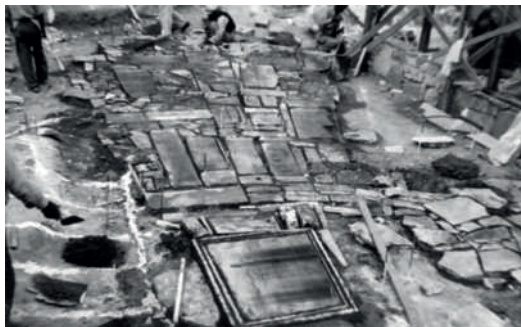
Above the fixed, motionless⁵ geometry of the earth stretches the perpetually moving domain of air and light.⁶

The Star of Life rotates, comes and goes, and so produces day and night, giving us heat and cold, showers and drought, clear and dark skies, cloud, rain and wind. The human soul rejoices in this mobile geometry of air and light which constitutes the seasons.

Light - the infinite world of form and colour - delights the soul. The soul meditates upon the hours, upon the angle of the sun's rays, the length of shadows, the disposition of rain and drought, hot and cold,⁷ the configuration of the clouds. But on this particular day what pleases me most is to concentrate on the spectacle of the ground bathed in calm, wintry light.

Here are stone formations shaped by divine forces - rocks, broken boulders, the dust born of the fruitful soil, its particles as uncountable as the stars.

I stoop and pick up a stone. I caress it with my eyes, with my fingers. It is a piece of grey limestone. Fire moulded its divine shape; water sculpted it and endowed it with this fine covering of clay that has alternating patches of white and rust, with a yellow tinge. I turn it around in my hands. I study the harmony of its contours. I delight in the way hollows and protrusions, light and shadows; balance each other on its surface. I rejoice in the way the universal laws are embodied and fulfilled in this stone - the laws which, according to Goethe, would have remained unknown to us had not an innate sense of beauty revealed them to the poet and the artist.



Stonemasons working on the Saint Dimitrios Loumbardiaris courtyard, 1954–58

© Dimitris Pikionis A.M.K.E., Athens. Photo: courtesy Agni Pikioni Archive

8. The profound sense of wonder aroused by the sight of the perfect accord between the air and light of a land and the geometry of its soil compels us to accept the existence of a harmonious unity linking all three elements. How else could one explain the incomparable harmony between the pure, spiritual, perfectly modelled shape of the mountains of Attica, and the fine, mellow air and brilliant light in which they stand?

Indeed, I do not think it would be presumptuous to say that this harmony is no accident but the rigorous consequence of the inherent harmony, which informs the whole principle of creation: on the contrary, it would be fully in accord with our innate sense of cosmic harmony. We may therefore accept as an axiomatic truth that the geometry of the ground and the air and light of a country are entirely consonant elements.

9. To recall the words of Heraclitus: 'Yet although the logos is common to all, most men live as if each of them had a private intelligence of his own', prompting Sextus Empiricus' comment: 'And this is nothing else than an explanation of the way in which the entirety of things is arranged. Therefore, insofar as we share in the memory of this we say what is true, but when we depend on private experience we say what is false: (English translation by Philip Wheelwright, Heraclitus, New York, 1964.)

In truth, it occurs to me, O stone, that as the incandescent mass of this planet was torn away from the sun and set spinning around like a ring of fire, eventually condensing into our earth, you came to occupy a place within its vast expanse that was in no way accidental. The harmony of the whole, which determined the inclination of our planet's axis, also assigned this particular place to you as your home, as the generator of your supremely spiritual form, within an atmosphere and light that are spiritually attuned to you.⁸

The dance of your atoms, governed by number, shapes your constituent parts according to the law of your singularity. You thus enact this twofold law of universal and individual harmony.

I feel you growing, expanding in my imagination.

Your lateral surfaces turn into slopes, ridges, and noble precipices. Your hollows become caverns, where water silently trickles from the cracks in the rose-coloured rock.

Stone, you compose the lineaments of this landscape. You *are* the landscape. You are the Temple that is to crown the precipitous rocks of your own Acropolis. For what else does the Temple do but enact the same twofold law which you serve?

More than anything else, is not the Temple also 'an explanation of the way in which the entirety of things is arranged'?⁹ Is its equilibrium not similar to that of the mountains of vegetation, of all living creatures?

All the forces of nature converge and work together to produce this particular configuration: the refined air, the bright light, the colour of the sky, the floating clouds, the slope of the mountains, the boulders scattered around the Temple's stylobate and the grass growing up between the cracks.

O earth, you reduce everything to yourself as the measure, the



General of the remodelling and tree-planting in the archaeological area of Acropolis,
Philopappou and Pnyx 1954-1957



The paved road towards Acropolis

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modulus which penetrates all things.

You gave shape to the city, and to the city's various forms of government. You gave shape to the sounds that make up language. You foreshadowed the arts that involve words and forms.

Is it not this concordance, this rule of the same laws in both nature and art, that allows us to see forms of nature transformed before our very eyes into forms of art, or vice versa - or one art form transformed into a different art form? Is it not this concordance, this uniformity governing the apparently most diverse creations, which has the power to reveal and explain them by reflection, by comparison?

As I paced upon this soil, as I journeyed across this kingdom of limestone and clay, I saw the limestone change into a lintel, and the red clay colour the walls of an imaginary shrine. The large round pebbles of the Cladeus river appeared to me as the heads of heroes, and the statues on the pediments as mountains. Zeus' long hair became a sheer precipice, and this mountain of a thousand shapes - which I gradually pieced together as I walked across it, recomposing in my mind the harmony of its contours - took on the form of a Greek statue.

The pleats and folds in the costume of this peasant woman undulate around her ankles, tracing mountain shapes upon the ground. The woven ornamentation around the hem of her skirt stands out as vividly as a frieze. The dance unfolds like a moving colonnade. The sound of the pipe, interwoven with the dancers' song, makes the mountaintops sway and the rivers flow. The rhythm of these draperies as they ripple around the body, the shape of this brow or forearm, the waves and curls of that hair - all of these explain the landscape.

O limestone, you fashioned the stern brow of Aeschylus. Musical notes emanate from the stylobate and the moulded echinus evokes an ancient manuscript. The austere structure that can be seen in the statues can also be found in language.



Ground plan of gradual rise going up from the parking space of Acropolis 1954-1957

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10. An inexplicable pattern of kinship and contrast links the green vegetation and the red soil with the two colours that adorn ancient Greek vases; black and red.

11. At moments like this, form and motion take on a strange stillness, becoming static. The vertical line, the horizontal, the oblique, and the point - all seem to become invested with a deepening harmony.

Yet what are the secret relations, O almighty number, that you have established today between the geometry of creation and the crystalline air, which allows the unadulterated essence of divine light to filter through to us?

No other light, no other day can ever equal the clarity of the calm, limpid autumn hours.

An ineffable mystery irradiates creation this day.

Why do the tuft-like clouds draw apart high up in the blue sky or float as gentle, transparent veils across the mountain tops? What have the innumerable blades of grass to tell as they break through the dark, moist soil - are they voices from the past, or spirits rising from the kingdom of Hades? And what about these rough boulders - white, grey-blue, pink - or the shards of pottery scattered over the grass?¹⁰ The voices of children at play and the crowing of a rooster echo mysteriously through the fine, rarefied air. Dried-up wells gape like the dark, open mouths of tragic masks, adding depth to the landscape. The skin expands under the warmth of the sun, and then contracts under the cold touch of shade. The autumn breeze plays sweetly with the blades of grass and the asphodels, both of them nourished by the earth's bitter green sap.¹¹

A profound mystery connects this hour and the light that pervades it with the golden hide of the wild beast, to the convoluted horns and thick fleece of these grazing, ambling sheep, yellow like the colour of time-worn marble, or black like the shadow of that dark rock.

Through the agency of this particular hour the mystery of time becomes one with the mystery of space. What irreconcilable elements have merged together here? Wherever one turns, one may see the double-headed hermae of antithesis.

Faced with a mystery of this magnitude, the soul no longer needs an explanation, for in the deepening of nature's mystery, the soul undergoes a process, an experience, a 'passion' in the depths of



The pedestrian road from the Philopappou junction towards the belvedere 1954–1957

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12. The sensitivity of nature penetrates into the work of art through the sensitivity of the spirit. What appears to be the rectilinear geometry of architecture is in reality the geometry of curves. The theoretical definition of the tensions and equations in these curves, and their translation into matter, can only be achieved by the finest artistic sensibility.

which lies understanding.

It is in moments like this, O Doric column, that your mystery is revealed to me. Now I understand: the 'tension' that governs your lines is not meant only to serve the laws of statics, extending natural beauty into a form of art;¹² the grooves of your fluted body are not meant only to distribute light equally across your surface, inserting shade into light and light into shade, so that the tones of your stone shaft blend with the tones of the sky above and the rock below. You are, it seems to me, an animate being thirsting for union as you revolve upon your own axis, your grooves like eyes that strive to retain, within their revolving motion, what has come to pass and to contemplate, full of trepidation, what is about to happen - but this is not all. More than any of these things, this hour reveals that this longed-for union would project and condense the culmination of nature's dramatic mystery within an art form corresponding to nature itself.

There is an undecipherable connection between these stories, this bitter grass, these green shadows, these voices that streak the air, the southern breezes, the torn plumes of the clouds, all this dramatic mystery which appears to be composed of irreconcilable opposites; all these are made one in the equation of your grooves.

Is not your own form made of irreconcilable opposites held together in perfect balance? And the coldness of the marble, the austerity of your vertical shaft, your parallel lines - have they not merged with the warmth of the sun, with the unsurpassable sensitivity of the spirit, to make you what you are?

It was surely in an hour such as this that the artist's mind conceived you. And each time that number establishes the ineffable harmony between that hour and your form, your mystery is reborn.

This is what I thought; on an early April day, when I perceived you behind the golden dust rising from the chariot wheels in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. Or was it on some summer evening, as darkness was spreading across the mountains in the



The Philopappou monument after the replacement of the railing with a thorny fence

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13. The austerity of the Greek column is of a different nature to the theocratic austerity of the Egyptian column. In the latter, it amounts to a subjection to divine attributes, whereas in the Greek column, it emerges as the product of a spirit that is austere, but also human and free.

west, enveloping the land, while in the east the sky was streaked with pink?

But in this wintry hour I think of you again, O Doric cyma, of the stern music of your form poised high up on the Acropolis, high above the sheer rocks and the clay soil of the olive grove. I reflect upon the winter light falling on your harmonious incurvatures, upon the cool shadows that nestle among them and constitute your darkness.

There is something awesome about the austerity, the sharpness, the sensitivity of your shape, rising out of a perfect mathematical formulation.¹³

I can visualize the men who wrought you. I can see the robes draped around their beautiful limbs. They have stern brows, furrowed by deep thought. There is sternness too about their eyes, their temples, and their beards.

But how is one to bring to mind all the hours of the year, or even of a single day? The spirits that inhabit morning and afternoon, noon and evening? The days of summer and spring, the halcyon days of winter and autumn? The days when the wind blows from the north or the south, the days of Apeliotes, the east wind, and of the summer winds that blow for forty days after the rising of the dog-star? For these are the spirits that will enable us to witness the 'suffering' and the transformation of form and space within the element of time.

This journal is by no means complete but does it really matter? Is it not enough if the perusal of what there is helps to make manifest the principle which I believe nature wishes to teach us: nothing exists on its own; everything is part of a total harmony. All things are interconnected; for they are all affected and changed by each other. We can apprehend one thing only through the intermediary of everything else.

Kärjäkivet is an independent publishing project of thought and criticism of art and architecture that was born from an artistic research around the unbuilt Saivaara Monument designed in 1978 by the legendary Finnish artist Tapio Wirkkala for the Saivaara fjeld in Lapland. The publication has been achieving, not in form but in content, the concept of Kärjäkivet that Tapio Wirkkala wanted for the Saivaara Monument: the creation of a place where men of all races and colors can gather to think. In this sense, there is an online platform - www.karajakivet.com - where several invited authors are able to gather through literary constructions produced by them, sharing their ideas about art, architecture and culture in general, in a sort of modern-day assembly.

Evoking the place that Tapio Wirkkala wanted to create at the top of the Saivaara fjeld, Kärjäkivet meant to be a place of slowness and introspection where to stop, "observe the landscape" that surrounds us and think.



KÄRÄJÄKIVET

Finnish word meaning “court stones” or “circle of stones”: places of judgment (originally iron age graves), where judgments were held and justice carried out, accordingly to the Finnish National Board of Antiquities.

In the ancient times, they were important places where the primitive leaders of the North got together in order to discuss and decide about common matters.

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