

SHAPING THE VISION: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK OF ARIS KONSTANTINIDIS

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Abstract

During his studies of architecture at The Technical University of Munich, Aris Konstantinidis (Άρης Κωνσταντινίδης; Athens, 1913-1993) comes in contact with the conceptions of Modernism. His early works reflect this affiliation, but soon he builds an architecture that does not renounce to the modern condition, and neither to establish a close relationship with tradition and genius loci of his country. Along with the practice of architecture, he develops a photographic activity, using photography as documentation and promotion of his architectural work. But he does not stop there, as he uses photography in all its possibilities. Throughout his life he uses it as a research and knowledge tool of his environment, and as a construction of the camera as well, I, e, as art of looking.

This paper studies the characteristics of Konstantinidis pictures about the Greek landscape and the vernacular architecture in his two books entitled Elements for Self-Knowledge. Towards A True Architecture (Στοιχεία αυτογνωσίας. Για μίαν αληθινή αρχιτεκτονική, 1975) and God-Built (Θεόκτιστα, 1992), and his final presentation in the design of books.

Keywords: Konstantinidis, architecture, photography, vernacular, book design.

Since the moment that modern architecture and photography of architecture have arrived to its maturity level, the architect has mainly used photography to document and to promote his work. From the 19th century, the engravings of the treaties were substituted in the specialised publications by a distinguished group of documentary photographs from the Architecture and the Historiography had supported the proliferation of its reproduction, a panorama that accustomed the public to a determined visual knowledge as, pointed out by Walter Benjamin (1931, 1999: 527), redefining a sentence by Moholy-Nagy, "*The illiteracy of the future, someone has said, 'will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography'.*"

With an amateurish or professional practice, the photography has developed as a reliable document in general and of the architecture in specific, characterized by its technical neutrality. But the artistic form has also developed in its interior,

which means a visual construction, which always has spoken in its proper language. Albeit the fact that architecture is conceived by the architect, undoubtedly, it is also created by the photographer, if it sees itself through a reproduced image.

Walter Benjamin (1931, 1999: 510) has affirmed, '*For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious*'. This premise shapes the fact that the photography has never intended to reproduce the objects as they are, nor expresses the truthful appearances of the objects, but attempts to represent them in a photographic form, which signifies to respect maximum to the characteristics which the expressive medium imposes. In contraposition to the direct photography, which neither has subterfuges nor tricks, Benjamin anticipates the danger of creative photography in the decorative tendencies, the photogenic art form, whose aim is its commercialism, an inevitable destiny of the architecture.

According to Nikolaus Pevsner (1949: 53), one cannot deny the power of the photographer to appreciate or to destruct the original. Thus, the architecture, converts itself soon to the accomplice of the camera and the architects started to project having the photographic image in the mind (Colomina, 1996). Due to this, the architects have controlled the capturing of the image with the responsibility of the professionals or they have converted themselves into the photographers of their own work. In spite of the fact that photography is not an end at itself for the architects, very few have avoided its captivating capacity of persuasion. Examples, such as of Adolf Loos, who conceives constructed architecture for the direct personal experience, are not frequent. His friend Tristan Tzara recognized him for his sixtieth anniversary as '*ce grand architecte, le seul aujourd'hui dont les réalisations ne sont pas photogéniques, et dont l'expression est une école de profondeur et non pas un moyen d'atteindre à illusoires beautés*'¹.

¹ Tzara T. (1930). Hommage de Tristan Tzara. In *Adolf Loos Festschrift Zum 60. Geburtstag am 10-12-1930*. Viena: Richard Lanyi. Quoted in Tournikiotis, P. (1991). *Adolf Loos*. Paris: Macula.

The history of the 20th century architecture was diffused by photographs published in the print medium, which indicates the existence of symbiotic relation from the beginning of the association between the two disciplines and that has shown itself in the first photographic evidence of Nicéphore Niépce, shot from the window on the sky, and I would like to mention the symbolic relation by taking into account the special relation among both disciplines, which means, when the architecture appears within photography or endosymbiosis, as it is the case quoted above, or when photography lives within architecture or ectosymbiosis, as it can occur in certain contemporary proposals.

On the use of the photography as an instrument of knowledge, one can say that buildings are photographed in order to be documented and to be eventually divulged. At the same time, architectural photography serves for a better knowledge and as an inspiration for other buildings in a circulated feeding process. However, for sure, the use of this representation technology, that has a great impact on the perception of the architecture, is subordinated to the phase of the design. Such a situation has been exceeded these days through the introduction of alternative practices that have assigned to photography a principal role in the conception and development of new proposals.

A particular use of photography made by the architect is the photography aimed to obtaining references, which directs it to its creative world. By capturing images of their immediate surroundings, or of its travels, the architects has given publicity to its particular form to observe and to understand the world, as may be the cases of Le Corbusier, Erich Mendelsohn or Fernando García Mercadal, among others. The Greek architect Aris Konstantinidis (ΑρηςΚωνσταντινίδης, Athens, 1913-1993) is one of these architects-photographers who understands his activity with the camera during his travels in Greece as a cultural practice that doesn't reduces itself only to illustrate his own work, but broadens himself with the vocation to capture the essences of the surroundings so that they could be served as reference and basics for the surroundings.

Aris Konstantinidis has received his German university education from the Technical University Munich (1931-1936), where he comes in first hand contact with the prevailing Modern Movement. When he returned to his country, he was awaited by the tragic years of Second World War and later, the period of Greek Civil War (1941-1950). The proclamations and the optimism of a modern redeeming architecture, initiated with a change of orientation in the 1930s towards an architecture which valued the material and the handcrafted technique, remained far and behind in Germany. Following the continued path, a second impulse comes from the regionalist tendencies that emerged after Second World War and was constituted by local manifestations of an international culture that, each in its own manner, reflect the aspiration to define a proper national identity. In Greece, the search was encouraged to leave the separation clear, in the political atmosphere from the Iron Curtain block and in the cultural aspect, within the heritage ambit of Ottoman Empire.

Konstantinidis shares a closeness of thought and results with other contemporary European architects, such as Le Corbusier himself, Jorn Utzon, Alejandro de la Sota or some time later José Luis Sert. Nevertheless, considering the circumstances surrounding the search of a national identity is the point where their results differed precisely. For example, in the case of Spain, the military coup and the subsequent Civil War provokes the great exile of the elite vanguard generation and Franco's dictatorship absorbs the idea of the national identity with a fake and imposing traditionalism, in whose heart, sporadic glimpses of critical regionalisms arises, which are given by Kenneth Frampton.

The period in the aftermath of The Second World War is productive for Konstantinidis. He photographs his own country, carries out the professional work for the Urban Department of Athens' local administration (1938-40), projects the studies for Week-end houses (1942-1945), marries the sculptress Natalia Mela (1951) and between 1947 and 1953, publishes three books² on urban and rural Greek vernacular architecture, among them, special reference must be made to the meticulous work on *Old Athenian Houses* (Ta

² *'Villages' from Mykonos* (1947), *Old Athenian Houses* (1950) and *Country churches of Mykonos* (1953).

παλιάΑθηναϊκά σπίτια, 1950), and which will form the germen of his future projects and publications and of the strong determination, he adopts on the different ways on how contemporary Greek architecture shall draw its inspirations and approaches from traditional and popular architecture.

In the search of the roots and the original truth in his photographic expeditions, he extracts lesions from this type of the architecture, understood as something as mutable that should be cultivated in order to produce the architecture of its period. As has been observed by Tzonis (1981: 164-178), Konstantinidis is the first among Greek architects, who created a consciously regionalist Modernism. It is, however, evident that this search is exercised under influence of Le Corbusier. The studies of the Week-end houses (1942- 1945) are direct references of the Week-end house or Villa Henfel (1935) at the Celle Saint-Cloud by the Swiss architect, and which he reproduces almost literally. The stonework walls, the vault and the corridors are constant in the articulated variations of the houses developed by him.

In the aftermath of The Second World War and The Greek Civil War, the 1950s are marked by the reconstruction era, thanks to the financial help from the Marshall Plan. These years are centred on the development of the industry, the promotion of tourism and of residential infrastructure, low cost housing to lodge a population, migrating from the rural areas towards the great cities in search of work. This necessity leads him to incorporate himself at the Ministry of Public Works (1942-1953).

The temporal parenthesis, before he involved himself again with administration, permitted him to go on with his interest for photography and he publishes “Η φωτογραφική τεχνη” (“The Art of Photography”), in ΕλληνικήΦωτογραφία (*Greek Photography*), No. 3, March 1955³. However, he was again chosen as the Director of the Department of Design of the Organization of the Workers’ Housing Society (1955-1957), where he works for the development of a series of projects of economic housing in many cities⁴. The legacy of modern architecture

³Article later included in Konstantinidis, A. (1984). Για την αρχιτεκτονική (*On Architecture*). Athens: Agra.

⁴In Athens, Piraeus, Heraklion, Serres, Thessaloniki, Pyrgos and Aghios Nikolaos (Crete).

on such projects consists in serving its functional proposition, the fidelity to a strict screen generatrix that will be a constant of his work and the honesty of the construction. His strong personality and a great architectural intransigence maintained over the time leads to confrontations with his superiors, which finally ends with his resignation.

He also became director of the Design Department of the Greek National Organization of Tourism (1957-1967). His most outstanding job is The Program Xenia (Ξενία, Hospitality), whose aim was to construct hotel facilities in the most peripheral areas of the country with high cultural, natural or historical values, in order to develop insignificant touristic areas.

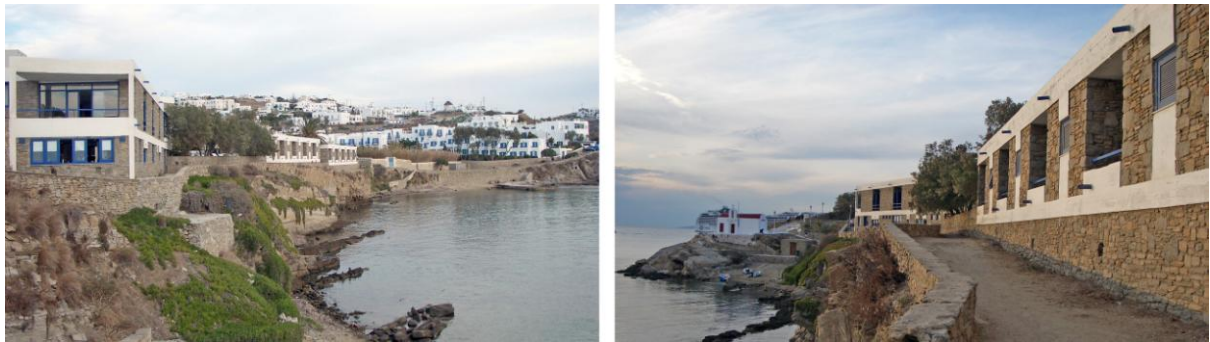


Figure 1. Aris Konstantinidis. Xenia Mykonos, 1958-1959.
(Photo: M. Correia, M^a E. Blanco)



Figure 2. Aris Konstantinidis. Xenia Epidaurus, 1959-1963.
(Photo: M. Correia, M^a E. Blanco)

The hotel at Mykonos (1958-1915) resumes the intervention around natural value; meanwhile he completes the Guesthouses for the actors from the theatre or the staff of the archaeological site of Epidaurus (1959-1963) for its historical value. Both the works, which are compounded by fragmented housing units and

without a general specific geometrical scheme, are arranged in a sinuous form on the sloping topography and a connection of tracks links the autonomous units. The walls of the low and extended buildings are of dry stone art work in the wall, completed by the freezing in reinforced concrete, elements that create a direct reference to the local place.

The Xenia housing facilities, characterized by a deep understanding of the qualities and aspects of any place, are a paradigm of the sensitive handling of the use of the forms and materials and the balanced incorporation in the landscape. It could be felt that these interventions were destined to reproduce a mimetic architecture. However, the result remains quite distant from the intention to emulate literally the architecture of the local place or of historical remains.



Figure 3. Aris Konstantinidis. Week-end house, Anavyssos, 1962. (Photo: M. Correia, M^a E. Blanco)

Perhaps, the place where he achieves a greater degree of timeless lyricism is with the private houses, whose most distinguished exponents are respectively the Week-end houses at Anavyssos (1962) and at Aegina (1975). They move between some uncertainty and leaning towards the traditional Greek house composed of a single room and the juxtaposition of corridors, an imprint of the houses Jaoul (1952-53) by Le Corbusier at Neuilly-sur-Seine. The compositional ambiguity, fomented by the flattened covering can be found at the small functional program, even if, they can be found in the larger program, when it is divided into volumes, such as the residence-studio by the painter Iannis Móralis

(1974-1978) at Aegina.

Through a great economy of media, Konstantidinis proposes a sensitive, reduced vocabulary deprived of decoration. As the buildings insert themselves into a natural context, he uses masonry supporting walls, following the constructive tradition and the adaptation to the weather, and a reinforced concrete unadorned structure. It exemplifies the coexistence and the dosing among the materials offered by industry, without unnecessary idolatries, and local materials.

Its grammar uses the sources of the reticular geometry of the modernist repertory, the geometry that had not appeared in the initial holiday houses, and in these houses is the warp and weft of them architectonical fabric; and apart from the house, from where he generates the variations: from the gaps of the screen and to the disposition and dimension of masonry walls that support the weight of the covering to follow the structural logic of its construction. On the warp, he constructs the corridors and the prismatic volume of a stereotomic architecture that manages the light in relationship with both internal and external spaces of the building.

Konstantidinis conceives architecture geometrically, however, connects it in an organic way, laying it on the earth as it would originates from it, above all, satisfying the functional, as well as material and psychological needs. The invariants he pleads for were respected since immemorial times by autochthonous architecture.

With the dictatorship of the Greek military junta (1967-1974), in 1967, he went into self-exile to teach Architectural Project at the Polytechnic School of Zurich. Once again, when he returned to his country in 1970, he returns to his profession as an independent worker, reconciling some sporadic consulting to the administration and taking up writing activity. At the end of the decade, he abandons the exercise of his profession in disappointed manner as he thinks he is no longer able to bring contributions further.

After the temporal break of almost twenty years, since his first writings, if we don't take into consideration the publications of projects and works, in the year 1975, he publishes the book *Elements For Self-Knowledge. Towards A True Architecture* (Στοιχεία αυτογνωσίας. Για μίαν αληθινή αρχιτεκτονική), in it he includes the photographs he had made between 1938 and 1973, accompanied by sketches and notes. Later he gave importance to his photographic production with the posthumous book *God-Built* (Θεόκτιστα), published in 1994, and that is exclusively composed of photographs. They are two books-manifest on Greek's natural and constructed environment designed totally by him, in which he exposes his poetic-architectural visual thoughts.

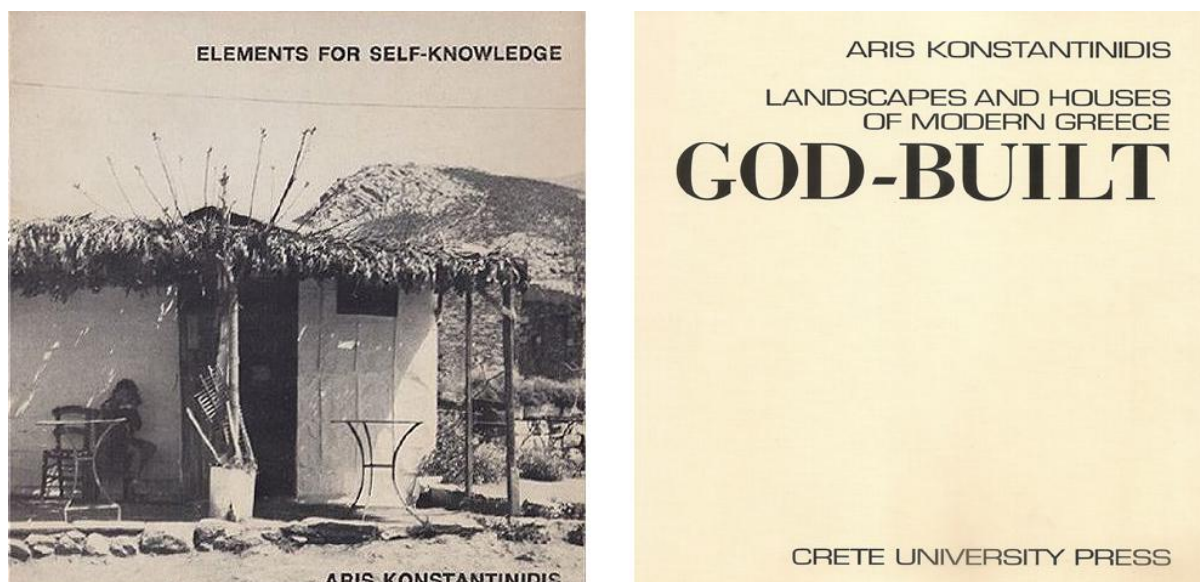


Figure 4. Books of Aris Konstantinidis.
Elements For Self-Knowledge. Towards A True Architecture. Photographs, Drawings, Notes. Athens: self-published, 1975.
God-Built. Athens: Crete University Press, 1994

The content of the photographs talks on the encountered images arranged in the editorial narrative to transmit a message. The books begin with the presentation of the duality sea – earth, to follow truffle by cliffs, beaches and rocks that transform themselves into mountains, valleys, meadows, stones and trees (olive trees). Almost at the beginning, emerge the first photographs of the Classic Antiquity. They are mainly details of the construction and the materiality of the

ruin, among which there is some panorama of the temples in the first book, whereas, in the second, he gives more attention.

In the list of the publications there are villages, rural houses, mixed farming constructions, streets and tracks, churches, hermits and cemeteries, in addition to whole a wide number of enclosings, umbracula and spontaneous stalls. Both domestic internals and images of the details of doors, windows, roofs, walls, apparels made of diverse materials, pavements or objects are equally recompiled.

Elements For Self-Knowledge is composed of five sections: black and white photographs, color photographs to highlight the chromatism of the intervening elements, the sketches of direct and delineated drawings. The penultimate section, that will disappear in *God-Built*, is dedicated to advertisements, signs and rural shops, some popular celebration and concludes with a vessel photographed from above, whose circular form seems to allude to a mandala. The illustrated heterogeneous constitution of the book leaves a last section, which is dedicated to the written word.

With reference to the drawings, the decided lines sketch quickly the profiles of the constructions, their interiors, their curious details, the frameworks. The background landscape disappears except some fine line of the sea skyline because the sketched nature is the one that wraps up the constructions for its closeness. It is a sort of drawing that fixes immediately with the hand the forms and contours, without disturbing other aspects of the light, texture or shade. The counterpoint is given by the insertion of more elaborated and sketched drawings corresponding to previous studies on the houses.

God-Built develops a narrative continuity and a larger unity than its predecessor, due the exclusive use of colour photographs and to dedicate itself with a greater abundance to the stereotomic constructions, albeit the fact that it concludes with the tectonic skinny constructions of the umbraculums, one of them being the beach through which he finishes observing the sea. If *God-Built* is his testament, he illustrates the dialectics between the geometric rationality of the structure and the autochthonous tactility of the walls.

The photographs of Konstantinidis are a complete plastic declaration of the landscape and also of men. In *Elements For Self-Knowledge* he affirms (1975: 302) '*Landscape and Man: these are the two primary factors for the creation of a true work of architecture. There can be no architecture without a landscape to build it in, just as man cannot exist outside a specific natural environment*'. Briefly, he portrays people, street scenes, including objects that evoke his absence more intensely. He is able to capture the relations of the human being with the place at the margins of the usurpations developed by artistic photography. Thus, he goes into the production of a photography experimenting in the same sense as Walter Benjamin (1931, 1999: 526) establishes the difference between creative photography and constructive photography of Soviet cinema: '*It is not too much to say that the great achievements of Russian directors were possible only in a country where photography sets out not to charm or persuade, but to experiment and instruct*'. The photographs are the bases on which he constructs his architectonic position of human and social dimension, through the appropriation of the past of man and the anthropic environment done by anonymous builders that made of Greek landscape something unique and special.

The format of the photographs is a very relevant aspect, as the two books are edited by him without any intermediary. In *Elements For Self-Knowledge*, formats appear in square and rectangular shapes, in their horizontal and vertical disposition. However, in *God-Built* the rectangular format is monographic. A substantial difference between the two books can be observed at the geometric proportion of the photographs rectangular format. Whereas in *Elements For Self-Knowledge* the rectangles prolong themselves, including to achieve a very large proportion and closely related to the content of the photographs, their proportion is more concentrated in *God-Built*.

It could be said that the reproducing form of photographs in the books of Konstantinidis has common points, overcoming the time and the distance, with the use of the mask claimed by Eisenstein to defend the cinema. The soviet film director postulates in '*Le carré dynamique*' (1930) the square format of the screen, as in his view this format is the format that cuts the less the framing

liberty of the projected image and is able to receive the largest geometric variation of settings. As the square surface is able to accommodate all possible rectangles that may be created in its interior, with the concealment of part of the surface of the image, dead surfaces are eliminated itself and intensity is given to remaining part. Therefore, it can be fitted in the grand format of the whole surface and it also uses the mask to make smaller squares and both vertical and horizontal rectangles, as required by the content of the images.

As the geometrical figure of the cinematic image, the framework of the photographic reproduction is attributed significance in respect to the represented. Content and framework establish a concordance or dissonance, on a case by case basis, to highlight the idea one wants to emphasise. In *Elements For Self-Knowledge* the square format is, in general, used to act as neutral element as concerns the content. The reasons are diverse: to support a displacement, as we want that content's symmetry prevails, *a. s. o.* The vertical square cuts or supports, whereas the horizontal format fits to the content.

The decision of the square format of both books is truly another important aspect for the disposition of the photographs in its pages. While the pages are composed by themselves and also by opposing pairs, since these contrasts form the visual area of the reader, with respect to the photographs, they always have contact with at least one bode, so, they tend to peripheral situation and roughly centered position on the page is absent. The most varied book on this issue is *Elements For Self-Knowledge*. In it there is a whole casuistry of positions and combinations contributing to an important visual dynamic.

The previous analysis intends to explain the role played by the frame of the photograph and the design of the pages of the books can be assimilated to the geometric screen and its variations in the buildings, whereas the content of the photograph is closely related to the materiality constructed by them. The writings which gives an end to *Elements For Self-Knowledge* is thread of Ariadna so that whatever flows is the element, who wishes to go through the interior world of Konstantinidis. References by poets, philosophers, thinkers, writers,

painters and others than architects are incorporated. It is not strange that among them, only Perret and Loos are mentioned.

In both of his books, he gathers his deep understanding of the local cultural references, the inherent qualities to old archetypal structures and elementary construction of Greek landscape, he had studied through his texts and recorded in the photographic work consisting a resume of his life. The patient and constant work to disentangle the extraordinary in the ordinary with the synthesis photographs, demonstrates his conviction that architectural practice must be based on these above mentioned qualities and these qualities should join the earth to which it belongs. While photographing his own and also anonymous works, he chooses what his country's architecture is and should be and projects the aura of the permanent and unique -due to their common content-, a harmonious and epic balance between the natural and the constructed.

The appreciation by Susan Sontag (1977, 2005: 1) on photography reveals the transcendence of her authority to us '*In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing*'. In this aspect, with the photographic travels, Konstantinidis visualizes his architectonical thoughts of universal values, even if of specific application because he attends to the characteristics of the place. Thanks to the potency of the architect's look and through his camera, he discovers dimensions of reality that would, otherwise, remain hidden, and, in definitive, he achieves to construct the 'conceptual image' of the true architecture he intends to transmit.

Finally, it is worth noting that 'the men who love and respect and worship their art, as the most precious thing in life, and identify themselves with the events they describe' (Solomos' words) are the ones who seek and find in each tradition, even the most ancient, that which they wish to achieve themselves, in their own time, with their own faith and vision. (Konstantinidis, 1975, p. 325).

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