

Representing Greece: A story on marble

Costandis Kizis

Architectural Association School of
Architecture
London, UK
kizis@aa.school.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

In 1938, young architects Alexandra and Dimitris Moretis were commissioned by the Greek State to design and build the pavilion of Greece in the New York World Fair of 1939. The Greek representation in the “World of Tomorrow” Expo was mainly a reminder of the past: a pavilion with marble showcasing important ancient Greek sculptures (both in copies and originals). The link between ancient Greek civilization and modernism was still at stake, and “Greekness” was the vehicle for modernism in interwar Greece. Twenty seven years later, Greek-Canadian architect Ninos Chryssopoulos won the competition for the Greek pavilion for the Montreal 67 Expo, with a proposal of perfectly aligned white cubes around a courtyard. Minimal in form, the pavilion was presented as an invocation of both the Cycladic vernacular and the ancient courtyard prototypes; yet there were voices asking for more “Greekness.” What changed and what stayed the same in the course of thirty years, in the architectural representation of the Greek State abroad?

“The development of international mega-events parallels the growth and spread of ‘modernity’ and nation-state consciousness. (...) They represented and continue to represent key occasions in which national ‘tradition’ and ‘community,’ including a national past, present and future (...) could be invented and imagined.”

(Roche, 2000, p. 6).

This year Rem Koolhaas brought up-to-date the relation of modernity and national identity, by asking the participant countries in the Venice Biennale to respond to the theme of “Absorbing Modernity”. The Venice Biennale is not an Expo, but both the theme in question and the history of the exhibition itself share many issues raised in the national representations at the Expos. If Expos are a field for historical constructs, then architecture is the means that brings them physically into being. The “national pavilion,” this literal construction of the ideological constructs of modernity and national consciousness, is itself a means of representation. Similarly to a drawing that depicts an already conceived form, architecture can represent what has been invented as an ideology that is supposed to condense nations’ values and their relation to modernity.

This form of representation through architecture is being looked here through the case of the participation of Greece in Expos, and her constant

struggle to reconcile the distant past with a modernity yet to come, in which the Greek State has always played a crucial role.

In the mid-thirties, Greece had no scheduled policy for her participation in Expos, and the national representation was in the hands of local embassies and consulates. Nevertheless, there was no doubt about what would be the image to be transmitted to the rest of the world: the classical antiquity.

A paradigmatic case is the Greek pavilion for the 1934 exposition of Chicago. In a staged photograph a couple of embraced youngsters dressed like ancient Greeks are admiring copies of classical sculptures, while in the background of the neo-classical hall, another semi-naked youngster is playing an “ancient” guitar. This idyllic picture has not much in common with the reality depicted in non-staged photographs of the same event: A group of men in a “tsolias” traditional outfit, possibly Greek immigrants, are proudly posing next to a copy of Hermes by Praxiteles. Statistics on the walls, commodities in glass showcases and plastic-wrapped miniature dolls again in traditional outfits complete the untidy image of the pavilion.

This gap between the staged Greek ideal and the reality of the pastiche compositions of the pavilions was to be bridged by the work of a couple of young architects who undertook the task of designing the official pavilions of Greece in Expos, Fairs and other commercial exhibitions abroad, from 1937 to 1968.

Alexandra and Dimitris Moretis started working together in 1937 and run a

career of thirty one years in the public services, with more than 120 pavilions designed and built until their resignation during the military junta of 1967-1973.

The most significant work in their prewar career was the pavilion at the 1939 World Fair of New York. Most of the national pavilions had already been designed and built by the Fair's organizers, and the national representatives' task was the interior design and the exterior decoration. Greece had a semi-attached pavilion in the Court of Nations, which gave her three façades and a highly visible corner. The main façade received a large orthogonal marble-cladded surface, crowned by a frieze with replicas of parts of the Parthenon's frieze, on which a line of Pindar on peace and good order was written.

On the left side of the entrance a big statue "symbolizing the architect"⁽¹⁾ (Moretis, 1941) was placed, with a national coat of arms over it. On the right side of the façade and in a distance from the pavilion, the Moretis had constructed a levelled marble pedestal on top of which a copy of Hermes by Praxiteles – once again – was placed.

Marble cladding brought from various quarries in Greece along with the exhibition of ancient Greek sculptures (copies and originals), became the means of expression of the national pride for a glorious past that Greece wanted to convey to the rest of the world.

In other words, antiquity represented the modern state. This was not only for lack of technological development and innovation at home, and should not be simply seen as a controversy. In the

context of the 1930s, the ancient past was the vehicle for modernity in Greece, at least in literary circles (Vagenas, 1997). A re-appreciation and re-use of the classics was not at odds with European modernism, and was also a convenient disguise for the circulation of innovative ideas in the conservative context of the Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1940).

Yet this was indeed the official representation of the Greek State, and despite the initiative by the Moretis to include some modern Greek art in it, the pavilion was mainly conveying the helleno-centric historicist rhetorics of the dictatorship.

In their will to separate the retail space of the pavilion from the art space, the Moretis designed a hall of the pavilion as a "museum," where ancient Greek sculpture was displayed. Nelly's photography⁽²⁾ played a crucial role in the message that the Greek pavilion conveyed. Her photographic compositions of ancient Greek sculptures juxtaposed to figures of modern Greek peasants were featured in floor-to-ceiling size panels in the museum. Based on very selective photography, the argument of the collages was the racial continuity of the Greek people. This weak and invalid argument was one of the popular nationalistic credos of the 1936 dictatorship, and is being constantly revived in any rise of extreme nationalism, like the one recently being experienced in Greece.

After the Second World War and the disastrous civil war that followed in Greece (1946-1949), the first large event in which Greece decided to participate

was the Brussels Expo of 1958. Up to that time, between 1950 and 1958, the Moretis had developed an architectural idiom based on the introduction of elements of the classical Greek orders into simple, modern buildings and ephemeral constructions. At times Doric columns appeared in all detail, scaled down to the size of the pavilions, and superimposed to plain "modern" surfaces, and at times the ancient rhythm was simplified and stylized, in an attempt to produce a modern (in material and abstraction) version of ancient prototypes.

It was this aesthetic code that dictated the design of the 1958 pavilion for Brussels. The proposal consisted of three orthogonal volumes, linked with two stoas, one of which was the main entrance. The large hall, the biggest of the three volumes, featured simplified ionic capitals on a modern colonnade that covered a curtain wall. In this monumental composition, that bears in mind Italian prototypes of the 1930s, one would expect marble. Instead, the Moretis wanted to clad the pavilion with aluminum, in order to feature one of the few raw minerals that Greece produces. Marble was kept for the Greek theatre that completed the composition in the back slope of the plot, which the Moretis wanted to install permanently at the Expo (and thus having it funded by the municipality of Brussels). This first proposal was rejected by the Technical Committee of the Expo not only for technical and administrative reasons (as it was reported in the Greek press) but also for its aesthetic incompatibility with the spirit of the Expo (Van Hagendoren, 1956). Finally, Alexandra Moreti resubmitted a

simplified version of the project: three successive volumes, following the slope of the plot, with a curvilinear stoa in the place of the theatre. The aesthetic part, representing their idea of modern Greece, was non-negotiable by the Moretis, and finally accepted by the organizers. Yet it was clear that the representation of the country through the evocation of the classics was at odds with what modernity signified two decades after the New York Fair. It is indicative that Turkey, which in 1939 participated with a replica of an Ottoman palace by Sedad H. Eldem, had passed the wheel of the Expo design to the next generation of architects, Eldem's students, that sought the connection of the Ottoman tradition and modernity in a much more abstract way than the Moretis did.

The Greek participation after extreme delays caused by bureaucratic mismanagement between the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Finance and the Greek Consulate in Brussels, was later canceled, because the Greek government, constantly underestimating the importance of the Expo, never approved the necessary funding.

Confusion, mismanagement and lack of confidence among the minister and the different directorates of the Ministry of Commerce, possibly more representative of modern Greece than the pavilions themselves, led in 1964 to the commission of the Greek pavilion to a private company, instead of the legally responsible public service domain that Moretis had been directing. The initial proposal submitted by architects Kitsikis and Makris was a simple white marble box with the main facade covered with

glass and red marble, following on the one hand the late classic trend of international modernism, and on the other the stereotypical association of marble with Greece. It did not take much time for a crucial addition: The simple glass doors, embedded in the curtain wall, gave place to a classical Greek portico, wiping out the last shade of doubt on which country the pavilion represented. Interestingly, the usual suspect of early Greek pavilions returned: the organizers of the Greek participation had requested the exhibition of the original Hermes by Praxiteles in the pavilion, a request that was not fulfilled after a big outcry in the Greek press. Yet, apart from the reactions to the Hermes issue, the press was enthusiastic about the pavilion, praising the idea of constructing it in Greek marble. Dimitris Moretis was very critical of the participation of Greece in this arguably controversial Expo³⁾ and of the pavilion design itself. He accused its creators not only for repeating and downgrading the ideas of his 1939 pavilion, but also for being stuck on old prototypes. His strongest point of critique was against the portico; it was not the idea itself that he found wrong, but its position and lack of proportions.

One has to give credit to the Moretis for having constantly insisted in organizing architectural competitions for the pavilions of major events such as Expos, despite the fact that they had never been heard by their ministers, until 1965. Then, an architectural competition was organized for the pavilion for the 1967 Expo in Montreal, and won by the Greek-Canadian architect Ninos Chryssopoulos.

Chryssopoulos' proposal consisted of nine perfectly aligned white cubes around a courtyard. Minimal in form, the pavilion was presented as an invocation of both the Cycladic vernacular⁴⁾ and the ancient courtyard prototypes; the reference to antiquity had been finally minimized in the disposition of the plan. The paradigm of "Greekness" along with the touristic policy had already shifted to the appraisal of the Greek vernacular without abandoning the constant presence of Greek antiquity. The minimal composition of the nine white cubes could be equally recognized as a piece of contemporary architecture (one could also associate it with the cubic composition of Habitat '67, already designed in Montreal by young Moshe Safdie), and as an expression of "Greekness," this time mainly expressed by the Cycladic stereotype. Yet, this second reading of the work, explicitly expressed in the text that accompanied the proposal, was not enough for the Executive Committee, comprised by members of four different ministries. After the project had been commissioned to Chryssopoulos, the committee – by word of Moretis – asked for "the addition of two porticos (...), the creation of an open stoa with columns (...), the opening of windows on (...) certain walls" and some other aesthetic corrections in order to "emphasize the 'Greekness' of the pavilion's exterior".

In his letter Moretis wrote that:

"[The committee] without wanting to interfere in the work of the architect expresses the reactions of the public view. (...) I am sure that you will find the way to reconcile these views so that

the project will not lose anything of its character; but nor should it come in conflict with the sense that the public – especially the Greeks– have for Greekness” (1966).

We do not know whether Chryssopoulos followed the committee’s corrections or not; the fact is that the resubmitted project (of which no plans are saved) was rejected, and the architect was asked to return to his original scheme, which was built without alterations.

While the actual references to the Greek antiquity were kept humble in the architecture of the pavilion, the same cannot be said about the interior⁽⁵⁾, which, albeit renewed in terms of curatorial design, featured ancient Greek statues and many references to the classics, along with vernacular paradigms, all in the spirit of the touristic policy of the Greek State. The nationalistic overtones had given place to a more strategically planned touristic policy, something already implemented in the Moretis’ brief for Brussels 1958.

It is common knowledge, at least after Hobsbawm (1983), that traditions are invented, that national ideologies are historical constructs. This brief and elliptic account of the participation of Greece in World Fairs and Expos attempts to look at how Greek national identity, this construct that as much as it has changed in the course of the twentieth century never has it abandoned the reference to classical antiquity, had been manifested architecturally in the condensed scene of international exhibitions. What we are dealing with here is not merely the graphic

representation of architecture. It is the architectural representation of a country, or more precisely, of its image.

Who is the author of this image? Who does physically construct the ideological construction of Greekness? The easy answer would be “the architects” – in the Greek case, Alexandra and Dimitris Moretis. Yet, despite the fact that indeed the Moretis have left their mark on the representation of Greece abroad, what is mostly represented is the state of the stereotype of Greekness at the service of the touristic and commercial policy of the State. The construction (of the construction) of the national identity in an Expo has more to do with what is believed to be recognized as Greek abroad, and less to what was referred as “the public view,” or, to put on a more concrete basis, to what Greeks themselves would identify as their own image.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the Greek avant-garde was never part of the official representation in Expos: The ghost of “Greekness” never stopped casting its shadow over any official representation of Greece. Never?

Stavros Martinos (2014) has recently presented the controversial story of the built Pavilion of Greece in the Venice Biennale. Won by the arguably most avant-garde Greek architect of the thirties, Stamo Papadaki, the pavilion fulfilled the national rhetorics that the judges were anticipating to read by at the same time being a bold and daring architectural proposal. The neo-byzantine pavilion that was built in its place was the result of an obscure commission that overlooked

the competition prize, and it certainly was closer to the “byzantine prototype of Greekness,” supposedly suitable for Venice (a city with byzantine past).

This year, more than 80 years later, responding to Koolhaas’s theme “Absorbing Modernity,” Kostas Tsiambaos and Panayotis Tournikiotis proposed a superimposition of the Papadaki’s pavilion on the facade of the neo-byzantine one (Martinos, 2014). Instead of this proposal, the Greek authorities prioritized Yannis Aesopos’ proposal, Tourism Landscapes. I am not questioning the architectural interest of the featured projects, nor the fact that tourism indeed left modernity’s mark on the Greek landscape; yet this year’s Greek exhibit repeats graphically the stereotypes of the recent State tourist campaigns, a blue sea poster at the entrance being the most evident one.

Instead of an internal look to our modern architectural history, and a direct critical response to the question of “Absorbing Modernity”, the Greek national representation keeps on reflecting the State’s policy. If Koolhaas’ call was not enough to take its shadow off the back of the representatives in this primarily architectural exhibition, then it seems that Greece is still far away from the point of entering critical debates that go beyond outdated questions, such as the representation of the national. ■

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NOTES

(1) The sculptor of the statue is not known.

(2) Nelly's stands for Greek photographer Elli Souyioltzoglou-Seraidari (1899-1998). Interestingly, the Moretis themselves do not mention her in their letters and reports, possibly silently distancing themselves from the nationalistic rhetorics.

(3) Not approved by the Bureau International des Expositions.

(4) The category of the "vernacular" never ceased being a reference even in the early pavilions. What has changed is that what was firstly shown by folk artefacts and craftsmanship gave place to the architecture of Greek settlements. This is both because of the extensive study of the latter after the war, but also because they were at the same time new touristic destinations.

(5) The interior design was the object of a separate competition, followed by a suspicious commission to professor Ioannis Liapis (1922-1993) and his team.