

# Architecture in Cyprus between the 1930s and 1970s

THE SEARCH FOR MODERN HERITAGE

STEFANOS FEREOs AND PETROS PHOKAIDES



Fig. 1. Front facade of the colonial police station in limestone. The rationalistic style is combined with a traditional architectural idiom

The development of modern architecture in Cyprus is connected both with the unstable political conditions and with the absence of architecture schools. Local architecture followed the ups and downs of the political scene and, until recently, was produced by individuals educated and trained abroad, in centers of varied architectural cultures.

The introduction of modern architecture must be placed in the early 1930s when Cypriot society, under British colonial rule since 1878, showed the first signs of a rudimentary political and social organization. After World War II, the strategic military importance of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean increased and, between 1945 and 1960, a program of infrastructure and legislation implemented by the colonial government was the foundation for economic development and urbanization. The first public modern buildings were constructed.

Between 1930 and 1960 Cyprus evolved from colonial status to that

of independent state. After 1960 and for two decades a powerful modernization process took place, introducing the cult of modern in architecture and in every other aspect of social life.

## 1930-1960: THE *POUROPETRA* PERIOD

In Cyprus the period from 1930 to 1960 was a transitional stage not only for political and social conditions but also for architecture, during which the country moved away from an anonymous vernacular production to take part in international trends. In the 1930s the first qualified Cypriot architects returned after finishing their studies abroad, to introduce the first modern characteristics in the country's architecture. Until then, the majority of architects were foreigners who worked either individually designing schools, churches or houses for the elite, or as employees in the Public Works Department of the British colonial government. In the capital Lefkosia, the main center of architectural production, buildings of a variety

of architectural styles were realized with no single or dominant trend. The limestone or *pouropetra* was used extensively, creating the appearance of continuity with the local historical architecture. Lefkosia's Venetian walls were made of this dark-yellow soft stone, which during this period was used in the construction of 'heteroclite' buildings, from neoclassical schools and bourgeois residences to colonial government police stations (fig. 1) and administration buildings.

From the 1930s onwards cities further developed and the first public buildings were erected along the lines of international modernism. A significant role was played by the architect Polys Michailides in the modernization of architecture during this period. After a short term in Le Corbusier's office in Paris, and collaboration with Thoukidides Valentis<sup>1</sup> in Athens,



Fig. 2. Polys Michailides, Orphanage building, view of the front elevation, Lefkosia, c. 1934

he permanently settled in Cyprus around 1930. The front elevation of the Orphanage building (fig. 2), which he designed in 1935, reflects the transitional nature of the local modern buildings of this period. Limestone is ingeniously combined

with concrete, the new hybrid material that invaded architecture in Cyprus, with an outcome that could ultimately be characterized as local idiom. Initially, limestone was used as a load bearing material, producing massive facings and facade elements, following the stylistic theories of rationalism. In later years, the architectural vocabulary became more pluralistic, and while the concrete elements were increasingly stressed, limestone acquired the purely stylistic role of covering the facade. In this postwar period, during which urbanization intensified and tall apartment and office blocks appeared, concrete frames were introduced, turning walls into mere partitioning panels and thus rendering the load bearing local stone unnecessary.



Fig. 3. Iakovos and Andreas Philippou, Kykkos high school, perspective view, Lefkosia, c. 1960

extensive publication, dedicated to the realized works of Cypriot modernism, one can read the image of a society that moves, works and entertains itself in a modern landscape.

Designed in 1960, the Kykkos high school project for boys and girls (fig. 3) is one of the first buildings

space. A system of sun-protection louvers, patterned as brise-soleils, was facilitated by the standardization which the new material provided. Finally, the exposed concrete on the external surface of the staircase epitomizes both the functionalistic principles of the architecture of this period and the accompanying



Fig. 4. Takis Zembylas and Diomidis Kythreotis, entrance of the wholesale market, Lefkosia, c. 1965

**1960-1974:  
DISCOVERING  
THE CONCRETE FRAME  
AND MODERN CULTURE**

The period between 1960 and 1974 is the first and perhaps the only time when a unified style in architecture emerges; one which reflects the dynamic conjuncture: architects equipped with the enthusiasm of their youth, showing up in the nick of time, when independence ensured the potential for both spiritual and economic development. The newly arrived architects and the ones that were already designing in the modern style produced significant works during this period, which are recorded in a 1966 issue of the Greek architecture magazine *Architecture* (in Greek, *Architektoniki*).<sup>2</sup> In this



Fig. 5. Iakovos and Andreas Philippou, Koupati showroom and office building, perspective view, Lefkosia, 1961-1965

where the new material, concrete, was applied according to the current international stylistic codes. The young brothers Iakovos and Andreas Philippou, who had studied in Milan and London, used a reinforced concrete frame as a supporting structure, with pilotis enabling easy access to the building, allowing for greater openings and the possibility of a transparent fluid

freedom in facing, in terms of form shaping, plasticity and complexity. This was further explored when the character of the project and the building program enabled the architect to express the new material's capacities, providing wide spanning structures for factories, markets (fig. 4) and stadiums. During this era, the concept of functionalism dominated design

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process, from the rational organization of circulations and distribution of program in space to the shaping of building forms. Addressing the design problem of multi-purpose buildings, and in a way interpreting the building legislation codes,<sup>3</sup> the ground floor is often shaped in a flexible manner, separated from the upper floors (offices or apartments) that form rectangular prisms. At times the ground floor follows the site's irregular nature, producing twisted and angular shapes, guiding the flow of people around the building; or else it forms a recess allowing the creation of an arcade. Often the first floor is a volume lifted above ground level (*fig. 5*), while the staircase appears as an autonomous element, stressing the functional importance of vertical

Kanthos (*fig. 6*). It is the first house realized in Cyprus with purely modern characteristics: distinct functional division of the sleeping zone from the social functions, use of the pilotis and open plan that bring about the clear distinction of supporting structure and walls, and finally the obvious plasticity of the building. The architect freely shaped the horizontal slabs, often extended in cantilevers and balconies, and he "treat[ed] openings as special transitional zones with the ability to correspond to the special conditions imposed by climate and light."<sup>4</sup> His interest in the climatic responsiveness of the buildings is manifest in his larger residential projects. Multi-story buildings were designed as large concrete structures consisting of repetitive

and direction of sunlight and treat the elevations accordingly. He rejected the obvious solution of opening the apartments onto the view of the historic center's Venetian walls, in favor of a concrete design strategy that finally produced an unusual form of apartment building.<sup>5</sup> The use of local material, typologies referring to vernacular housing layouts and the adaptation of buildings to local climatic conditions set Michailides's work in the 'orbit' of a potential 'critical production.' His passion for research and revival of the virtues of traditional architecture in a pure modern language led to a comparison with the Greek architect Aris Konstantinides. This comparison, although it has not been studied in depth, helps to evaluate Michailides's

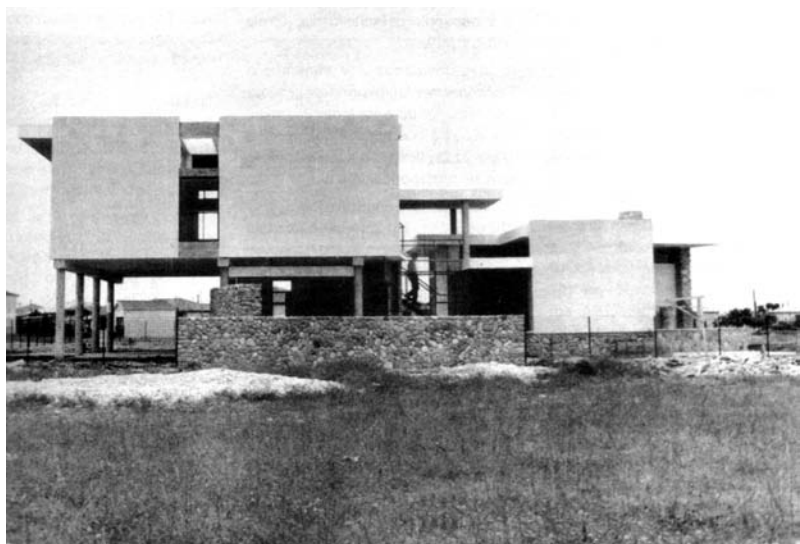


Fig. 6. Neoptolemos Michailides, *Kanthos residence*, West facade, Lefkosia, 1949–1952



Fig. 7. Neoptolemos Michailides, *Demetriou apartment building* (poly-katoikia), view overlooking the Venetian walls of Lefkosia, c. 1965

circulations; it also provides a visual counterweight to the concrete horizontal elements, which in this period were used extensively in the composition of facades.

**THE CASE OF NEOPTOLEMOS MICHAILIDES**

In this context the work of Neoptolemos Michailides stands out as a paradigmatic example, where the designer's intentions are readable with unprecedented clarity. In 1948, while still an architecture student in Milan, he designed the residence of the painter Theodotos

vertical elements combined with horizontal plates accommodating the program. In an experimental work of structural rationalism, an apartment building in Lefkosia (*fig. 7*), Michailides exposes the concrete-frame construction system, pushing the Dom-ino concept further. The rooftop's construction frame is unfinished, creating a covered terrace that shows the possibility of a future extension. The structural elements and the concrete sun-protection louvers are emphasized, expressing the architect's need to expand the material's use, to control the amount

work and shows that modern Cypriot architecture aspired—like any local architecture—at creating its own symbolic figures.

**TRACES OF MODERN LOCALISM**

Architects can become symbols of general trends. Likewise, architecture can be read as the symbolic image of a period expressing the circumstances that stimulated its production. Thus, alongside the localism of Michailides, which has come to be seen as an individual phenomenon, what is revealed is



Fig. 8. The modern landscape constructed on Famagusta beach, in the 1970s

also architecture's unintentional local character. The development and prevalence of modern architecture in Cyprus mirrored the modernization process that took place right after the independence, and invaded every aspect of social and individual life. Furthermore, images of modern life were adopted in emulation of the global life-style broadcasted on TV, starting from the 1950s, or in popular magazines and, more significantly yet, the cinema. Examined today, the projected images of this period show society's expectations for up-to-date and modern life styles.

The general architectural developments of this period are based on the colonial legislation of 1943. In the provisions of colonial law "relating to the roads and buildings," there were no restrictions concerning the expression of modern architecture. Conditions for suburban development already existed in Lefkosia, only a few meters from the historical center, and, buttressed by the country's economic situation, facilitated the absorption of modern architecture. The rules of building laws and the freedom provided by new materials were favorable to the development of modern architecture. As a result, architecture mainly produced self-related buildings in an urban context both

loose and unified. Concrete dominates as the building material during this period. Requiring no initial technical expertise in its application, it was adopted by the non-specialized building industry in Cyprus. The technical know-how subsequently achieved facilitated the construction of large infrastructure such as water dams, while also helping architects involved in projects with bold structures that demonstrated the material's capacities and yielded a type of structural expressionism. The economy of tourism supported by both the state and the private sector began its development during this period. Architects carried out projects for tourist facilities and hotel complexes. The vertical landscape of Famagusta that rose next to the sea became a major destination of local society forming a new kind of public space where vacation and recreation became social phenomena (fig. 8).

In school and church architecture, a number of new modern-style buildings were constructed during this period, bearing witness to the assimilation of modernism by conservative social institutions. Through the new school buildings, modern architecture established its pioneering role as a catalyst of modern education. After finishing his

studies at the École des Beaux-arts in Paris in 1950, Dimitris Thymopoulos returned to Cyprus, and for a decade designed and constructed a significant number of new school buildings, creating a prototype model still applied until recently (fig. 9).

As far as residential architecture is concerned, the modern movement is associated mostly with the middle class. The scale of Cyprus and the small number of architecture firms were propitious to the dissemination of a unified style in housing architecture, found equally in urban and rural areas. Stavros Economou's housing layouts can be identified as perhaps the most common type seen in this period. His architectural language, as observed in his own house (fig. 10), is based on the Villa Savoye model and Corbusian vocabulary. On the ground floor, the building's shape and skin form a recess, revealing its structure and providing a transition from the public street space to the private residence. White stucco covers almost all the elements of the building and, along with the rationally organized plan, indicates the architect's purist intention.

The design of single-family dwellings is one of the main design issues addressed by local architects. In contrast to the vernacular type of housing still built at the time, a new kind of private space and way of life are introduced: the layout's program is reorganized, with public spaces (kitchen, living room) linked to the entrance and distinctly separated from the private spaces (bedrooms, bathroom) which are often housed on a different floor level. The open plan is applied to the ground floor, where free walls distribute the program, and where the transparency achieved by large openings defines the relation with the outdoor spaces. Local culture and traditional architecture play a prominent role in the production of a local style, owing either to the use of local materials or to that of decorative motifs in the interior layouts. The arches which previously

appeared in colonial architecture and later in the work of a minority of architects constitute a direct reference to a local historical and traditional pattern. At the same time, architecture adapts to the local climate, re-interpreting the vernacular architectural solutions of in-between spaces to control climatic conditions. Sun-protection louvers and cantilevers become distinctive features of the local production. Furthermore, the care brought to outdoor spaces and their treatment with vegetation are characteristic of the local culture.

The modern era ended with yet another political break. The 1974 events resulted in a dichotomy henceforth dividing the country and interrupted the development process that had begun in the 1960s. A psychological barrier emerged, leaving the modern heritage underestimated and hardly researchable. Mechanisms and institutions that could produce knowledge and create conditions for criticism and architectural discourse were absent until recently. With the establishment of new architecture schools in the past few years, a chance is given to scientific research on the questions posed by the work produced until 1974. At a time when the state sought to promote self-rule, did society participate actively in this modernization process? Was the modern style absorbed consciously as a symbol of progress? Did it really come as break with the past? Who wanted it and why? Was architecture an active contributor or was it simply the background for the 1960s lifestyle as depicted in photographic archives?

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Fig. 9. **Dimitris Thymopoulos**, Lykavitos elementary school, one of the first modern schools of Cyprus, Lefkosia, 1955–1957

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**NOTES**

- 1 Thoukidides Valentis (1908–1982) was a Greek architect, a member of the Greek CIAM team and professor at the Architecture School of the N.T.U. of Athens.
- 2 *Architektoniki* 55, 1966.
- 3 One of the rules of the building legislation

was to use 70% of the site's area on the ground floor, 50% on the first floor and 30% on the upper floors, with no limit for the number of floors or the total height of the building.

4 Zinon Sierepeklis, "Routes of Cypriot architecture, after the war," lecture (Lefkosia: 1984).

5 "Everything here has an emphatic sharpness and one could say a stilted indifference for anything conventional. Thus we have an open war with established values, an imposition of the ugly as a legitimate element of the enterprising." Dimitris Filippidis, *Five essays on Aris Konstantinides* (Athens: Libro, 1997).

Fig. 10. **Stavros Economou**, the architect's house, Lefkosia, 1956–1958

