

A SENTIMENTAL INTEGRATION – DIMITRIS PIKIONIS' PLAYGROUND AND ITS EASTERN ORIGINS

ZHANG YINGLE

Abstract

Between 1961 and 1964, the Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis (1887, Piraeus - 1968, Athens) designed and conducted one of his last works, the children's playground at Philothei district, Athens. In this garden-like playground located between residential areas and pine woods, Pikionis introduced expressive references to create a scenario that reveals a latent unity between two different cultures, the Western and the Eastern. Apart from those Byzantine archetypes that historically show a close affinity to Greek culture, the garden's loose layout with meandering flagstone paths, the entry gate's simple construction, the pure manifestation of panels and frames of the elevated pavilion, and those clear details on straw roof, wooden structure and stone footings, drive this exoticism to the remote region, evoking the images and spirit of traditional Japanese Zen gardens. Pikionis' early pictorial education in Munich and Paris offered him insights into Eastern and especially the Japanese culture. Oriental motifs subsequently became a recurring reference in his projects, as an ascent that first rose from the Athenian Open-Air theatre (1933), developed in the landscaping work at Acropolis (1951-1958) and came to its crest in the playground. By combining various methods of designing and building, the Greek architect systematically sought out the "fundamentally and inevitably homogeneous" among different architectural traditions in this oneiric place. Pikionis took advantage of the topography, using geometric matrix of visual control to establish a layered structure in the garden space. This order results in a particular experience of movement that, from entry to the inner place, adapts to the ritual walk in Japanese tea gardens. Hybrid character also can be found in architectures, whose simplicity integrates construction of traditional Japanese villa and Greek vernacular houses. Then, the metaphorical ambience rendered by those symbolic elements, the straw hut, the wreckage besides dry pond, evokes Greek archaic images as well as the particular sentiment of "quietness" in Zen spirit. Spatial order, constructive manner, materials and spiritual monuments are those factors that compose the oriental tone in this daily and casual site in Athens. Far more than a play of *Japonesque*, this ambitious yet humble-look garden stretches over time and space, over the history of modernity in relation to antiquity, echoing the remote world across its proper culture. The value conveyed by Pikionis half a century ago is still shining today: to repudiate our habitual fixation on technology and globalization as aesthetic system, the practice of seeking the common value from individual traditions and fixing their differences into the universal backdrop is more necessary than ever before.

Key words: Dimitris Pikionis, Athens, playground, oriental

1. "A Man Of The East"

"Someone said correctly that the trajectory of the Greek nation will depend on our responsible position between East and West. I will add: Also, on the suitable composition of antithetic currents in a new form. I could analyze how this problem is presented in architecture. But suffice it to say here that I am a man of the East." (Pikionis, 1989:37)

Dimitris Pikionis (1887-1968) (Figure 1.) was born in Piraeus, Greece. He showed the gift of painting when he was young. After graduating from Athens Polytechnic University on civil engineering in 1908, he went to Munich to study painting. There, Pikionis got to know the expressionism works and admired, above all, Cezanne's works so much. Then he moved to Paris to study architecture for three years. During that period, the young architect had the chance to deepen his insight into the Eastern traditional culture which, as he said compared to the Western, excelled in spirituality.

Being the origin of the Western civilization, Greece has been holding a close relation with the Eastern world as well due to its great geographical advantages. Pikionis thought highly of the pureness and spiritual expression in the Oriental art, and he insisted that such narrative inherited from the antique period is still living in Greece today. Pikionis devoted his lifelong career in studying the similarities and differences between West and East. As a painter prior to an architect, his pictorial works have interpreted both of the two artistic languages, on the one hand, the technique of impressionism, originally derived from Japanese *Ukiyo-e*, were applied, and on the other hand, Greek myths and landscape were depicted as recurring theme. Such combination also played a key role in Pikionis' concept of space and architecture. Simple construction, raw materials and ritual establishment of the Eastern buildings, especially Japanese vernacular architectures and gardens, had a great impact on Pikionis. Such oriental motifs subsequently became an important reference in his work. It first rose from the Athenian Open-Air Theater (1933), developed in the landscaping work at Acropolis (1951-1958) and came to its crest in the children playground in Philothei, Athens, built between 1960 and 1964. Pikionis organized this garden-like playground in a loose layout. Its meandering pathways, simple pavilions of wooden structure, straw roof and stone footings, not to mention the metaphorical ambiance rendered by those symbolic elements, clearly evoke the Oriental aesthetic of Japanese tea garden.



Figure 1



Figure 2

2. Hierarchical Layout

The composition of traditional paintings shows one of the essential differences between the Western and the Eastern concept about space. Unlike the accurate perspective in the Western paintings which has been refined since Renaissance, indicating particular angle of observation, Chinese and Japanese drawings always divide the entire image into smaller parts (Figure 2.) to avoid a dominant structure. This arrangement results in a composition consists of independent systems that show the scene part by part. The absence of unified measurement converts the whole image into a game of scale, in which dimension of objects and distance between them are more expressive and subjective than accuracy.

The different concept of space, seen from paintings, naturally conducts the design of traditional gardens. European gardens are normally distinguished by the organization of perspective from the central avenue as axis that enables visitors to get a dominant view (Figure 3.); while the Oriental ones were made based on the unpredictable scene from nature. Any structures that may lead to an overall read are avoided. Like the paintings, Chinese and Japanese gardens are usually composed of several smaller parts of own character (Figure 4.). They are relatively independent so that visitors can enjoy the changing scenery while walking through.

Besides the spatial composition, the symbolic narrative in Japanese tea gardens fascinated Pikionis so much to develop his own work. In fact, a great Japanese garden is always seen as an art of arranging thresholds. Those borders, some are physical and others are more abstract, play the key role in delimiting parts and guiding the itinerary. The garden's main gate sets the first threshold to separate the interior pathway and the outside

street. Entering the gate, visitors are led to a promenade before reaching to the middle gate as the second threshold. This second gate, usually arranged as a simple wooden structure, reduces its physical function yet gives a symbolic tone that implies the entryway into a deeper space. Further on, the plowed ground of Karesansui, known as dry landscape, stands for the third threshold aims at clean the mind. The last threshold appears at the low entrance of the teahouse that forces everyone bowing before entering. It means the equality of all visitors and to show respect to the host. These four thresholds form an ascent of symbolism and spiritual expression that transcends functionality, composing the spatial sequence of Japanese tea garden.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Pikionis' playground shows a great inspiration from such Oriental layout. The architect has made use of the subtly centralized structure of the give site, whose outmost area is a little bit higher than the central ground, to introduce his geometric matrix as the manner of dividing the layout into phases and establishing spatial order from the peripheral part to the core space. (Figure 5.) The site is surrounded by fence to give the interior privacy. A simple gate of wooden structure and straw roof (Figure 6 and 7.) recalls the entrance of the plaza of Church of St. Dimitris Loumbardiaris on the Acropolis path. It establishes the first threshold. Such enclosure resembles those Oriental gardens that, on the one hand, detaches the site from outer space, and on the hand, intervenes into the natural context through humble installation instead of outstanding mark.

Like the Japanese tea gardens, Pikionis' playground is made of several smaller parts of individual character. Pathways are arranged as the secondary thresholds to connect these parts and transit visitors from one to another. An axis does lead the way from the gate into the playground, yet with much weaker capacity compared to the one in traditional Western gardens. Pikionis extended the axis only to the middle of the site. The unsymmetrical layout and several narrow branches derived from the axis deprive the privilege from this central path. It indicates the orientation in a casual and natural way in order to avoid dominating the place.

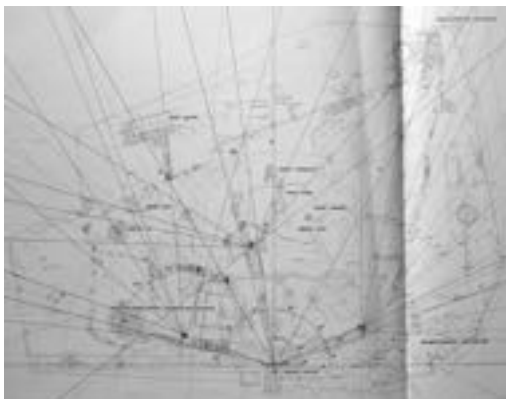


Figure 5



Figure 6

3. Transcendence Through Pathways

As in his pedestrian project of Acropolis, pavement was treated as an important theme in Pikionis' work of itinerary since it helps to indicate the changes in space and makes people to focus on their movement as method to experience the space. In the playground, Pikionis used different floor materials to meet the characters of each part. A small entry plaza in semicircle shape was assumed to be a transitional space to

separate the inner garden from the outside. (Figure 8.) Big slabs in loose arrangement on the floor distinguish this initiation as well as attach great importance to delimit. Following the plaza, there are four pathways moving towards different directions.(Figure 9.) Surrounded by trees and buildings, these routes create narrow corridors into the place. The middle path over which bush is covered even reduces the axis to a slender "tunnel" (Figure 10.). Pikionis used vegetation to control visitors' view so to induce their movement. In contrast with the loose composition of the plaza, these routes are paved tightly with smaller pieces, marking a clear change of the rhythm on the floor. After passing through pathways, visitors have entered into the inner part of the playground. Vegetation and narrow access make this interior phase well enclosed and hermetic. Pikionis kept the routes yet greatly reduced the importance. The intermittent pavement is barely distinguished from the large area covered with earth and grass. Bushes are planted as division of several open yards where facilities, huts, benches and other objects are arranged for children and parents.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Spatial dimension and pavement vary along with the itinerary from the entry to the inner part of the playground. They are the key factors that underline the process of transition, while indicating architectural intervention into the natural context through phenomenal narrative. The plaza, flat and paved, introduces visitors from the city street into a void space where their paces are arrested. Surrounded by pavilions and vegetation, this semicircle plot implies a new start yet it holds the extension of the outside space; while the inner part reveals the minimum intervention. Pathways connect the two phases. Through these passages of "return", visitors step onto a natural domain. Pikionis composed the spatial order to symbolize the relation between human and nature, as well as to convey the sensibility of picturesque ideal to complete the transcendence from the exterior to the interior.



Figure 9



Figure 10

4. Gaze of Metaphors

Actually the Greek architect was accomplished in symbolic paintings before his architectural work. It is well known his life-long friendship with Giorgio de Chirico, the Italian surrealism artist born in Greece who shared university period with the young architect. The influence from friends and lasting interest in painting deepened his metaphysical study on art.

When De Chirico first showed his painting series *Piazze d'Italia* (Figure 11.), Pikionis was deeply touched by the mystery and metaphors, the symbolic meaning of time, the history and the destination. He described:

"the delicate line that separated light from shade on rain-drenched soil was equally mysterious. In one, there was a tall building with a clock telling the time. I also remember a picture in which the half-glimpsed mast of a ship conveyed the mystery of departure, exile... heavily marked by the shadow of destiny. Enigmatic, too, the vaults and arcades, the statue of Ariadne touched by the autumn light. All the paintings had the same limpid autumn sky." (Pikionis, 1989:36)



Figure 11



Figure 12

Metaphor is a recurring theme that rendered Pikionis' own art works. His paintings series *Attica* (Figure 12.), drawn around 1940, depicted the landscape around Acropolis when the architect was wondering around the districts all days and studying the site. The hybrid quality of these sketches composed of the Western and the Eastern inspiration is represented by Pikionis' composition technique, symbolic and abstract narration, which then had been developed in his projects and helped to organize the playground.

Pikionis drew in simple lines, leaving large blank area that implied interval space. It resembles the composition in traditional Oriental paintings. Vacancy takes over connection between objects; absence of reference confuses the measurement of the scene so to intensify the depth and massiveness. Apparently the architect had applied this spatial effect and made it come to the real world. Within the inner part of the playground, sandpit, swings, huts and other facilities are arranged around the open site and kept a certain distance from each other. Instead of directly reaching to the installations, those routes which barely pass by or vanish before these points seemingly enlarge the space dimension.

Apart from practical technique, Pikionis' pictorial narration is always composed of two things, landscape and mythology. The sun, the ocean, the mountains where stand the temples contribute to the backdrop that contains the gods' figure. In one of his *Attica* works (Figure 13.), in front of the rolling Acropolis hills, Athena grips her lance, holding up her gorgons head on the horse adjacent to the serpent, incarnation of the god Erichthonius, creeping on the ground, symbolizes the birth from earth and eternal regeneration. Pikionis' sketches were concerned much with the process of creation of Hellenic civilization. He was fascinated by the pyramid composition to emphasize the role of earth as the origin from which the Greek landscape and culture were cultivated.

A relevant metaphor in the playground is tracing the "origin" along the itinerary and comes to its crest on two points of the site, the shipwreck and the straw hut. Both of them are arranged within the inner part, the former is close to the axial pathway and the other is located on the west side next to the sandpit.



Figure 13



Figure 14

Reclining beside the dry pond and the bridge, the shipwreck (Figure 14.) reproduces a common scene of the Greek coastline - a boat stranded on the beach or the riverbank. The shipwreck appears as the symbol of Greek marine civilization, and is telling dual meanings. It can be seen as a tragic play of the ever great power being ruined by the passage of time, or a story about generating and growing. This art of scenography in the heart of the playground represents a bridge with the Oriental ideas. A great part of traditional Chinese and Japanese gardens were designed based on imitating and reproducing the natural scenery. Rockeries, ponds and vegetation are arranged to have the composition and contrast of the landscape painting, as well as to give a story, myth or fable, to tell as a part of the entire narrative.

On the other side, the architect shows his inclination of simple construction on the hut (Figure 15.), as the entry gate and the pavilion at the plaza. Supported by thirteen wood pillars, its conical body is covered with several straw layers which make it as a primitive shed. The 1.5 meter-high entry is proportionate to the hut volume and appears even larger. (Figure 16.) Its dimension privileges children because adult have to bow to enter in. Not like the shipwreck that concerns about symbolization, Piklionis devoted concrete architectural elements to the hut so to evoke visitors' memory of antique forms. The wooden triangle over the entrance draws the gable of classical buildings while the exposed pillars project shadow on the ground even recall the typical atmosphere of lithic colonnade. The hybrid qualities appeared from this small hut interpret some essence of architecture, that is, over the long period of development and renewal of architectural language, there have been two inexhaustible power, the wisdom of vernacular forms and the spiritual value from grand monuments.



Figure 15



Figure 16

5. A Sentimental Universe

Pikionis thought highly of natural essence of objects, in the article *A Sentimental Topography*, he wrote *"I stood and pick up a stone...Fire molded its divine shape, water sculpted it and endowed it with this fine covering of clay...All the force of nature converge and work together to produce this particular configuration: the refined air, the bright light, the color of the sky..." (Pikionis, 1989:68)*

He made the ship and hut in barely "naked" structure to show their original forms which appeal to the primitiveness. The primitive era for the human history is equal to the childhood for a person. While observing the scenes that Pikionis composed, one would feel the closeness to earth and water, which are the origin of not

only the Greek, but our human civilization. Pikionis returns visitors to the enigma of antiquity while showing the development in which materiality and temporality of a place have been merged with each other in a historic narration.

"... has something transcendental, something more than the solution to a problem, a particular, intangible spiritual grace, a love which is the privilege of the East, which envelopes all aspects of the Eastern Christendom art. In painting you can see transcendental form, intuitive vision coming from deep within. The craftsman has a full knowledge of the real, but does not succumb to the external phenomenon like the craftsman of the West- he represents it as an inner reality through spiritual symbols." (Loukaki, A. 2014: 316)

"... I am weighing up the various visions that our time is about to shape. There is one that is the glorification of the ephemeral and another that would be the symbolic expression of the eternal." (Loukaki, A. 2014: 317)

It is this almost spiritual insistence on the interdependency of the East and the West, and of the turn things of time, which gives Pikionis constant motivation to seek out the *"fundamentally and inevitably homogeneous"* among different architectural traditions, and therefore renders his work a mixed character, the combination of the exotic and the domestic. Far more than a play of *Japonesque*, his ambitious yet humble garden stretches over time and space, over the history of modernity in relation to antiquity, echoing the remote world across its proper culture. At the same time, the critical edge in Pikionis' work half a century ago is still shining today: to repudiate our habitual fixation on technology and globalization as aesthetic system, the practice of seeking the common value from individual traditions and fixing their differences into the universal backdrop is more necessary than ever before.

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Captions of Visual Material

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- Figure 2. The Philothei playground, view to the entrance. Image from: Ferlenga, 1999:315
- Figure 3. Maple Viewing at Takao, Kanō Hideyori, 16th century
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- Figure 4. Plan of Versailles, 1789.
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- Figure 11. Piazza d'Italia, Giorgio de Chirico , 1913. URL:<https://educacion.ufm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Giorgio-de-Chirico.-Piazza-dItalia.-1913.-Oil-on-canvas.-Art-Gallery-of-Ontario-Toronto-Canada.jpg>
- Figure 12. Attica, Dimitris Pikionis, around 1940. Image from: Pikionis, 1989:30
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