

Thesen zur Dissertation:

BAUHAUS INTERNATIONAL

The Intellectual Formation of the
Greek Architect Ioannis Despotopoulos

A Journey from the Bauhaus and the Weimar Republic
to Athens, Stockholm, and post-war West Berlin

Dissertation

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vorgelegt von
Loukas Bartatilas
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Prof. Dr. Ines Weizman

Research Topic

"The following considerations have arisen from events that I have experienced and from direct impressions that I realized while commuting between the eastern Mediterranean in Greece and the westernmost north in Sweden and Germany"

Ioannis Despotopoulos (1973)

The thesis presents and analyzes the formation and evolution of the intellectual work of the Greek architect Ioannis Despotopoulos. His work is of special interest as it presents a new narration on the evolution of 20th-century modern architecture and its connection with the social and political challenges of this era. Despotopoulos' intellectual work is the blending result of his lifelong exchange with the different cultural, political, and architectural environments he lived in and his broad and international network. Despotopoulos' trajectory covered a large part of the 20th century, passing from the Weimar Republic, the Bauhaus, and interwar Athens, to the Nazi-occupied Athens, and post-war Stockholm, Athens, and West Berlin. The research shows the most important pieces of Despotopoulos' intellectual work, explains the fundamental elements of his way of thinking, and analyzes how it was formed throughout his life in response to the significant events he lived. It also explains in which way the Bauhaus influenced his work, making him one of those who contributed to what is called the international perception of the Bauhaus.

Ioannis Despotopoulos – A Short Biography

Ioannis Despotopoulos (Smyrna 1903–Athens 1992) is one of the most important but underestimated Greek architects. He studied architecture in Hannover (1924–1928), and between 1922 and 1923, he lived in Weimar, where he came into contact with the work at Bauhaus. This made him the only Greek architect who experienced on-site the teaching work of that famous school. He also lived in Berlin (1928–1930), where he worked for Erich Mendelsohn and visited often Walter Gropius' office. In Berlin, he became closely acquainted with social-oriented architectural projects of the Weimar Republic era, an experience that strongly shaped his way of thinking. On his return to Greece, he participated in the country's major infrastructure projects of the 1930s by building schools and sanatoria. During the Nazi occupation and the subsequent Greek Civil War, he taught at the National Technical University of Athens, participating in the Greek Resistance and planning for the country's post-war reconstruction. Due to the Civil War, he was dismissed from his university position in 1946, and in 1947 he fled to Sweden to avoid exile (Verbannung). There he stayed for 14 years while teaching and designing various cultural centers across Sweden. At the same time, he was actively involved in West Germany's debate around post-war reconstruction, became a professor at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, and consultant to the Greek government for urban planning projects in the context of the Greek-German post-war economic collaboration. In 1959 he was awarded first prize for his design of the Cultural Centre of Athens. In 1961, he returned to Greece and his previous university position. In 1964, he was elected a member of the Berlin Academy of Arts. His major theoretical work on *The Ideological Structure of Cities* was published in book form by the Academy of Arts in 1973.

Problems Addressed and Aims of the Dissertation

Ioannis Despotopoulos is the only Greek architect to have lived in Weimar in the Bauhaus era, interacting directly with the school's principles, teaching, staff, and students. His experiences at the Bauhaus and in the overall atmosphere generated by the Weimar Republic had a catalytic effect on his later work, making him see architecture as a means of achieving goals that would benefit society. Henceforth, he devoted his theoretical interest to exploring how ideologies of all kinds have affected the structural designs of communities and cities over time. However, in the field of 20th-century architectural theory and history, the case of Despotopoulos' intellectual work has never been addressed in detail until now, neither in the international literature related to Bauhaus and European modernism nor in the architectural context of Greece. The thesis fills this gap.

Despotopoulos dealt with architectural practice, university teaching, and theory. His most important building work is the Athens Conservatory, a building that has been described as one of the most important examples of post-war modernism in Greece. As a professor, Despotopoulos left his mark on a distinctive group of students during the 1960s. Nevertheless, his theoretical work remains unknown. Much of it is unpublished and remains in boxes in his archive to that day. The only book he published in his life did not receive any attention at the time of its publication. This research sheds light on this aspect of his work.

Despotopoulos paid for the position he took during the Greek Civil War at a high cost. This isolated him from the post-war Greek architectural discourse. The research clarifies that his condition of constant movement is both the reason that gave content to his intellectual work and for the lack of knowledge of it. The presentation of his intellectual work and the analysis of its formation complements the scant and fragmentary knowledge we have of the architect so far. This dissertation sheds light on the international perception of the Bauhaus through its relationship with architecture in Greece, on the connection of 20th-century modernist architecture and its political developments in Europe through the perspective of a single personality, and on the evolution of modern architecture in Greece.

Positioning the Case of Despotopoulos in the Field

Given Despotopoulos' life path and work, he cannot be located within the group of modern Greek architects who, after having studied abroad, devoted themselves to architectural practice within the Greek territory. Although his work dealt with issues of identity and locality, it does not deal with them in the foreground through the question of form. Instead, by having solid local cultural and historical references, Despotopoulos' work dealt with the issue of how architecture and urban planning contributed to broader and then-emerging social visions and challenges, as well as individual fulfillment through community belonging and educational and intellectual activities. His path meets that of other international modern architects of his time, whose work had universal approaches, ubiquitous orientation, and still many local implications.

His case can also be integrated within a broad interdisciplinary field beyond architecture. Despotopoulos' thinking concerns the social and political implications of architectural practice

and bears elements at the intersection of architecture with political theory, sociology, philosophy, and history. Furthermore, it becomes part of the debate around cultural exchange, knowledge transfer, and Greek-German relations during the 20th century.

Who does this research address? The answer to this question is given through the work of Despotopoulos himself. His constructive and compositional approach implies that the audience should not be exclusive and selective – rather the opposite. From his writings and overall work, Despotopoulos never distinguished between his 'German', 'Swedish', and 'Greek' part. On the contrary, he used elements from the above contexts to produce universal solutions oriented to support the better being of every society and human. Thus, the audience the thesis addresses is interdisciplinary and international: those who focus on the evolution of the modern architecture of the 20th century in Europe and are interested in its connection to society and politics.

Method

The primary method is archival research. In addition, field visits and photographic documentation of the sites visited, literature research, and unstructured interviews were used. Events that contributed to the research development were the 2019 exhibition *From Building to Community: Ioannis Despotopoulos and the Bauhaus*, curated by the author, and the attendance of many of the Bauhaus centenary celebrations in Germany in the same year. The writer's knowledge of Greek and German contexts and languages was an important supportive tool.

The vast amount of sources that formed the majority of the thesis' content comes from the two primary sources: the Archives of Modern Greek Architecture in Athens and the Archive of the Academy of Arts in Berlin. Furthermore, as the first objective of the research was to explore the relationship between Despotopoulos and the Bauhaus, a visit to the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin was carried out during the first stage of the research. The delivery of the second part of the architect's archive to the Archive in Athens in 2019 and its partial cataloging by the author led to the discovery of essential documents, which were significant in the development of the final form of the research. Most of what is presented in this thesis is the result of primary archival research.

Literature research carried out dealt with how Despotopoulos' work has been understood so far, the international perception of the Bauhaus, and the debate on modern architecture in Greece. Knowledge of the broader political, cultural, and social context, both in Greece and Germany, was deemed necessary because his work fed into and responded to the broader challenges of his era.

Main Findings According to the Thesis' Structure

The thesis is not a biography of Despotopoulos. Therefore, it does not go into detail about every aspect of his work. The text is structured around the three primary social contexts, which Despotopoulos was part of in three distinctive periods:

- the broader Bauhaus circle in Germany during the Weimar Republic,
- the National Resistance circle during the Nazi occupation in Greece,

- the circle of the (West) Berlin Academy of Arts.

The observation of a small but important detail of philological nature was decisive. Having acquired familiarity with Despotopoulos' style of writing and vocabulary, it had become apparent that Despotopoulos was a cautious user of words. The specific word *milieu* was used, certainly non-accidental, only three times out of the entire volume of his written work, to describe the abovementioned social environments. The thesis is divided into three parts, with each part focusing on each *milieu* Despotopoulos was part of.

The first part covers the period before his departure to Germany in 1921 until the 1933 Athens' CIAM and the publication of his legendary manifesto, *Urbanism*. It presents Despotopoulos' relationship with the Bauhaus, the broader environment of the Weimar Republic during and after his studies, and the influence this relationship had on his early works. It also presents the influence of his stay in Berlin in the first works he did after returning to Athens.

The second part runs through the 1940s. It presents the connection his teaching work in 1943-1946 had with the Bauhaus, the social environment of the Nazi occupation in Greece, and the challenges of the post-war reconstruction. Furthermore, it presents his activities from Stockholm, which resulted from the circumstances of the Greek Civil War.

The third part focuses on Despotopoulos's post-war activities related to his participation in the Berlin Academy of Arts. It shows how Despotopoulos began his path to the Academy of Arts in the 1950s through his work in Sweden, his participation in the post-war Greek-German economic cooperation, and his study of the Cultural Centre of Athens and presents his activities as a member of the Berlin Academy of Arts from his election to his death.

New Insights

The thesis defines the so far Despotopoulos' unclear relationship with the Bauhaus. For years, he was named as the only Greek of the Bauhaus but no additional information was given. The analysis of his studies in Hannover shows how Despotopoulos started to explore modernity and the way he linked it with the Greek Christian Orthodox tradition. It was in Hannover that his fundamental interest in the city and its social life emerged, which later became his main theoretical focus and dominated his intellectual work.

The research findings related to Despotopoulos' stay in Berlin and his early works in Athens offer a new interpretation of his work. Until now, Despotopoulos' work was analyzed based on geography rather than on content, dividing it into the periods of *his studies*, *Sweden* and *Greece*. Despotopoulos' stay in Berlin has been seen, therefore, as an integral, and relatively unknown part of his studies. Nevertheless, archival research revealed the importance of this period in Despotopoulos' overall work and the connections it had with the work he produced during the first three years upon his return to Greece. As a result, the thesis unified these two periods under the umbrella of a new period, the so-called *Self-Study Period*.

Despotopoulos was also active in the Greek group of CIAM and played a key role in preparation for the 1933 Athens CIAM. The research presents how Despotopoulos and his like-minded colleagues tried to implement the idea of the famous Bauhaus motto in Greece, namely the unity between art and technology, as the concept behind Greece's interwar development.

Until now, the analysis of architectural production during the 1940s is a taboo subject in the historiography of Greek architecture. The analysis of Despotopoulos' teaching work and his overall activities during that time offers new insight into the understanding of this highly important period of Europe, on the connections of modern architecture with the ideas of the Greek Resistance and the visions of the reconstruction of the country after the end of the Nazi occupation.

Despotopoulos' teaching was called by Hubert Hoffmann the *Greek Bauhaus*. This was because he established a teaching method not only based on laboratories but also because the projects he taught were responding to the political and social challenges of this turbulent period. Due to the Civil War and his progressive beliefs, Despotopoulos was dismissed from his university position. The thesis shows that from the time he faced the danger of being exiled for his ideas, something many of his friends and colleagues could not escape, Despotopoulos managed to flee to Sweden in 1947 with the help of people from his Bauhaus network.

A new interpretation is given to the until now unified *Swedish period*. The thesis divides it into parts, with the first of it to be interpreted as a continuation of his intellectual and teaching work he had started in Greece during the Nazi occupation.

Through Despotopoulos' case, the research reveals how architecture contributed to the revival of Greek-(West) German relations after the end of the Nazi Occupation through the Greek-German post-war economic collaboration and shows how the study on the Cultural Centre of Athens was related to this collaboration. Furthermore, it shows that the work in Sweden, the involvement in the West German debate around post-war reconstruction, and the design of the Cultural Centre of Athens were the pillars for his election as a member of the Academy of Arts.

Previous research has minimized the Academy of Arts' impact on Despotopoulos' intellectual work. The thesis redefines this narration by shedding light not only on the unknown activities of Despotopoulos as a member of the Berlin Academy of Arts but also on the need of West-German architects of the post-war time to identify themselves with the principles of Greek antiquity and Athenian democracy. The legendary 1967 trip of the Academy members to Athens and the support they offered to Despotopoulos, once the dictatorship was established in Greece, are part of this attitude. The thesis analyzes the content and meaning his book on *The Ideological Structure of Cities* has for his entire oeuvre, considered the culmination of his intellectual work.

Despotopoulos offered the possibility of holding a retrospective at the Bauhaus Archive Berlin, however, without success. The thesis explains how this opportunity lead him to review and reflect on the whole of his post-war work, and through it, to close the symbolical circle of his long intellectual journey that had begun in the same city, Berlin, more than fifty years ago.

Open Questions for Future Research

The thesis constitutes, through primary archival research, important new information on Despotopoulos' intellectual work, opening the path for raising new questions. The thesis leaves out detailed analyses of his architectural work. His most recognized architectural projects, such as the Sanatoria projects of the 1930s, the Cultural Centre of Athens, and the Athens Conservatory, are mentioned here only to support the aims of this thesis. Therefore, subsequent studies focusing

on his architectural and design practice are necessary, considering the numerous and not yet analyzed sources from his archive.

Despotopoulos' long interaction with the CIAM circle, seen comparatively with the work of other significant architects of this group and time, could also be a topic for future exploration.

Furthermore, a detailed analysis of his teaching work, either that of the 1940s or that of the 1960s, could be the subject of future research. However, a detailed analysis of the 1940s work, seen as part of the broader context of the time is emerging.

The life and work of Despotopoulos touch other scientific fields, such as history, political science, international relations, and cultural studies. Despotopoulos was a member of networks composed of visionary scholars from Greece, Germany, and Europe. The *Antaeus* and the *EPAN* network, born out of the effects of the Nazi occupation in Greece, the CIAM group from all over Europe, and the community of the Berlin Academy of Arts in post-war West Germany, are such cases. Its members carried a strong feeling of social duty, believed in common European and humanistic values, and experienced firsthand WWII. Comparative research of these networks can offer new insights into the history of interdisciplinary knowledge in the European area.

Research on architectural projects in Greece after its liberation from the Nazi occupation and during the Greek Civil War is necessary. This will contribute to new interpretations of post-war architecture in Greece, which will not be based on morphological quests but on the way architecture responded to the political and social challenges of that dividing time. Architectural research in Greece owes this to the protagonists of this period, who, under conditions of occupation and social misery, were able to envision a different future for their country.

Finally, locating Despotopoulos' work in the international context and specifically in the field of international Bauhaus can form a part of a broader comparative study of the Bauhaus impact in the Mediterranean area.

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