

WIDENING OF THE INTERMEDIATE BETWEEN THE HILL AND THE CITY: AS A CASE STUDY, THE CORRELATION BETWEEN PHILOPAPPOU HILL AND ANO PETRALONA

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Abstract

The city of Athens presents significant interest in terms of its topography: its numerous hills, prominent features of its relief, hold pivotal and multifaceted importance. They function as fragmented remnants of the historical background, as "Cultural Landscapes." They stand out as reference points for their surrounding urban areas, as landmarks, as environmentally significant natural enclaves, and simultaneously as spaces for recreation. However, the expansion of the urban fabric seems to have created a problematic relationship with the hills and the natural topography. Urban development "besieges" the hills, which now resemble islands in an "urban archipelago." Consequently, it becomes evident that the relationship between the city and the hills is driven towards polarization, generating a dichotomy. This dichotomy is paradoxical when considering that the hills are vital and integral elements of the capital city. This study seeks to explore possible ways to renegotiate the rigid boundaries between the city and the hills, focusing on the intermediary space between them. Expanding this intermediary zone potentially achieves an organic osmosis that could enhance the interdependence of the natural and the artificial, the historical and the contemporary. Specifically, the study examines the case of Philopappou Hill and its problematic relationship with the Ano Petralona neighborhood. It aims to dissolve the rigidity of this dichotomy and introduce their fertile interpenetration. The goal is to design a common ground for coexistence, which will serve as a "threshold" to Philopappou and the diverse human activities that can take place there.

Key words: *City, Interweave, Intermediate, Spectrum, Hill, Philopappou, Athens*

1. INTRODUCTION

The urban fabric of Athens continually expands toward its surrounding hills. For Émile Burnouf, it is "*the city of hills,*" while Giorgos Seferis would later write: "*Nations of the Sun and you cannot face the Sun, nations of humans and you cannot face humans.*" Perhaps, then, Athens is the city of hills and we cannot face the hills: places we struggle to confront, since they have become isolated within rigid boundaries of the urban network. Such separation reinforces a divide between natural and artificial, historical and urban. Italo Calvino would write in the "*Invisible Cities*": "*From one part to the other, the city seems to continue, in perspective, multiplying its repertory of images: but instead it has no thickness, it consists only of a face and an obverse, like a sheet of paper, with a figure on either side, which can*

neither be separated nor look at each other." This strict distinction between hill and city reflects a contemporary tendency: the "museum-ification" of historical places.

Yet this approach generates profound issues. Contemporary life withdraws from historical continuity, detaching itself from the flow of time. As a result, the relationship between *genius loci* and city, between individual and place, between society and history, becomes weakened. This fragmentation is paradoxical: humans are part of the natural, just as the natural becomes a vessel for the artificial. When divided, "place" loses its capacity to weave a meaningful, unifying narrative, and its spatial vitality diminishes.



Image 1: Map, the city of hills as an archipelago

Architectural synthesis has the potential to reassemble these fragments, to bind them into a coherent narrative that acknowledges both the passage of time and the lived present. Such a narrative must intertwine parallel threads of meaning, forming a spatial collage in four dimensions, with time embedded in its very genetic code. As Norberg-Schulz observed, *"Only when we comprehend our place will we be able to participate creatively and contribute to its history."* Each era inscribes itself upon place, layer after layer, like translucent sheets of rice paper that contemporary life painted over with dense pigment. Active participation in this continuum is often undermined—either through the detached display of the past as spectacle or through indifference to the traces it has left behind.

2. THE CASE OF PHILOPAPPOU HILL AND ANO PETRALONA

The strong polarities of the contemporary Athenian landscape inevitably create "cracks" along the fine line that separates them. The abrupt transitions between these poles weaken the dynamics of the in-between space. In the case of Philopappou Hill, viewed from Ano Petralona, this "crack" is embodied by the elevated peripheral highway: an almost entirely impenetrable boundary of reinforced concrete that violently intervenes between the

neighborhood and the hill. Yet the city and the hill should not (and must not) be seen as two distinct, demarcated, antagonistic entities with rigidly predetermined characteristics. The hill belongs to the city; it is an inseparable part of it. Perhaps the current dipole of "Hill or City" can be redefined through a merging, becoming "Hill in the City." Such an organic unification could enrich the experiential dynamic of place and bridge the gap between the polarities that have been violently entrenched in the foundations of the urban fabric: open and closed, accessible and inaccessible, public and private, present and past, built and unbuilt, city and nature, asphalt and rock. In every possible form, the city has been built upon oppositions and contradictions. A critical issue that should concern contemporary design, therefore, is how to process and adapt the urban fabric in ways that generate intermediate states, fluid transitions: an authentic intent of unification, blending, and bridging of these bipolar relations.

Observing the shoreline, one can draw the following conclusion: the limits between ocean and land are not as clear as we tend to think. The intermediate zones are undefined; if we were to see the coastline–ocean dipole as black and white, multiple shades of grey appear. This approach could potentially inform design, to soften the differences and emphasize the shared points of intersection between opposing forces.

"As inside and outside are nothing more than arbitrary segments of the division of an infinite time—time that, moving ever forward, continuously calls the center into question."

Perhaps, then, the aim is to emerge at the threshold of Plato's cave, at the point where sunlight penetrates, escapes, disappears, and oscillates between day and night, each time revealing a different aspect of things: a shifting objectivity that intertwines with the subjectivity of the self—the place, the threshold where the imaginary and the real collide productively.

"Boundaries must be filled with shadows and mystery."

Spatial oppositions—dual conditions such as inside and outside, open and closed, visible and hidden, day and night, light and shadow—when used in design, undeniably enrich the experience of space. They do so not because they offer themselves as fixed, integral properties, but precisely because they can shift between each other along a spectrum. Yet we often ignore the extraordinary potential offered by this spectrum, since we tend to perceive situations as clear-cut opposites. As Nietzsche observed: *"The generally inaccurate way of observing sees everywhere in nature opposites (such as hot and cold), where in fact they are not opposites at all, but gradations."*

Perhaps architecture should neither reinforce these strict, sharply defined polarities, nor aim to establish a universally clarified spatial condition. Instead, space should transmute the spectral nature of oppositions through their organic gradations. To achieve this, a first crucial step would be to "loosen" our tight grip on the desire to categorize things as black or white, to perceive them through a dialectical prism of "is" or "is not," of "yes" or "no."



image 2: the spectrum as an answer to dipoles

The proposed solution lies in the intermediary between these dipoles that are identified. This approach can challenge and realise an architectural syn-thesis that wants to achieve an osmosis between the anti-thesis that emerged. The strict limit that separates the hill and the city can be demolished, while keeping its traffic purposes. The urban fabric can be readjusted in a way that it can create a seamless introduction to the place of the hill. The proposal redefines the limit from a single “line” in the topography to an expanded space that penetrates both the area of the hill and the city. Now the threshold acts as a common space for contemplation and absorbing the essence of place.

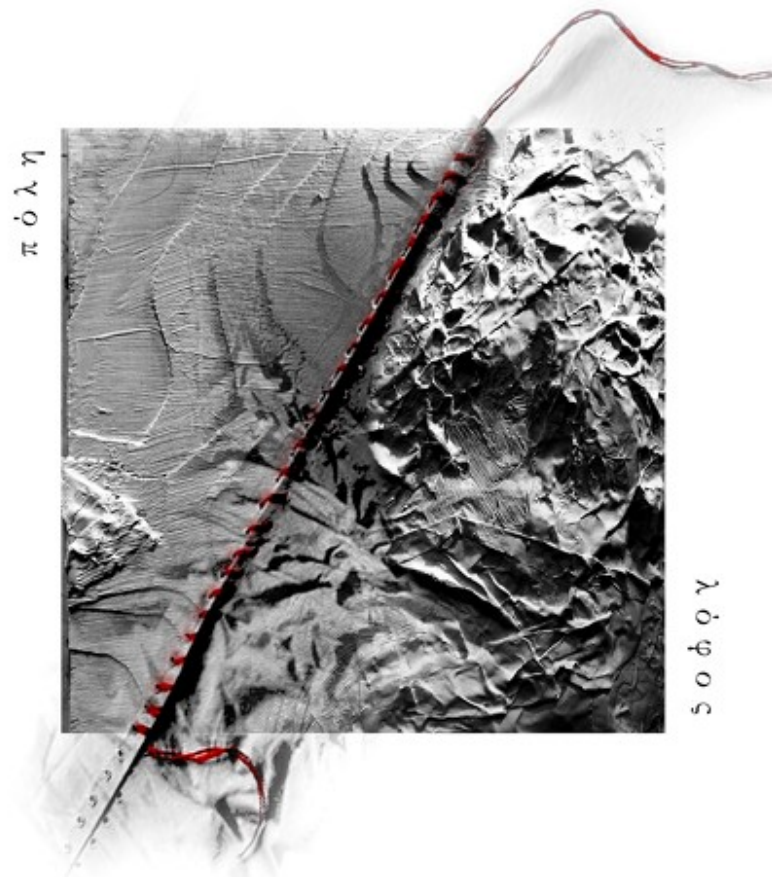


Image 3: The need for the city and the hill to be collated